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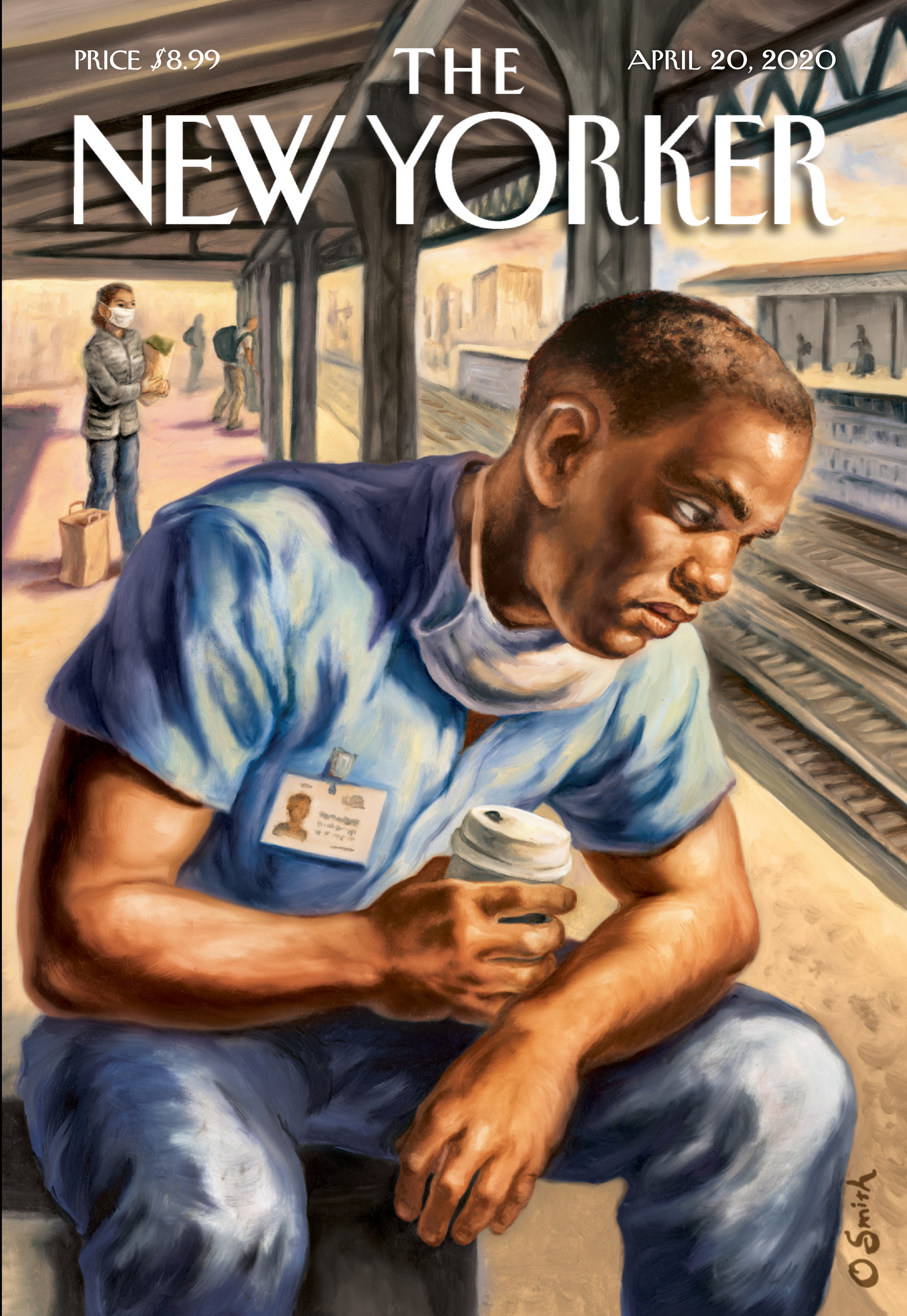

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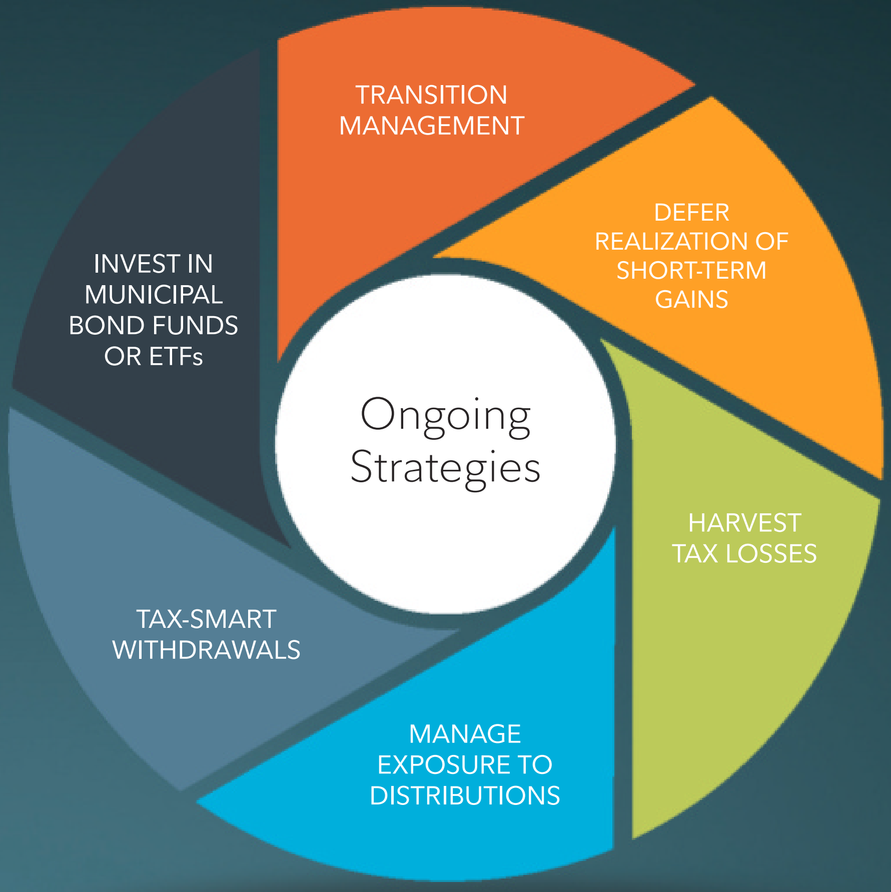
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CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Mayer (*"Enabler-in-Chief," p. 54*), the magazine's chief Washington correspondent, is the author of "Dark Money."

Nick Paumgarten (*"The Price of a Pandemic," p. 20*) has been writing for the magazine since 2000.

Julia Story (*Poem, p. 61*) is the author of "Post-Moxie." Her new poetry collection is "Spinster for Hire."

Ben Lerner (*Fiction, p. 68*) was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2015. His latest book, "The Topeka School," was published last year.

Madeleine Schwartz (*Books, p. 77*), a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, created the Ballot, a Web site that reports on elections taking place outside the United States in 2020.

Mark Peterson (*Portfolio, p. 46*) is a photographer based in New York City. He has published the books "Acts of Charity" and "Political Theatre."

Michael Specter (*"The Good Doctor," p. 34*) has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1998. He is an adjunct professor of bioengineering at Stanford University and the author of "Denialism."

Rebecca Mead (*"Fractured Fairy Tale," p. 26*), a staff writer since 1997, is the author of, most recently, "My Life in Middlemarch."

Jonathan Blitzer (*"Juan Sanabria," p. 16*) became a staff writer in 2017. He covers immigration for newyorker.com.

Amanda Petrusich (*Pop Music, p. 70*) is a staff writer and the author of "Do Not Sell at Any Price."

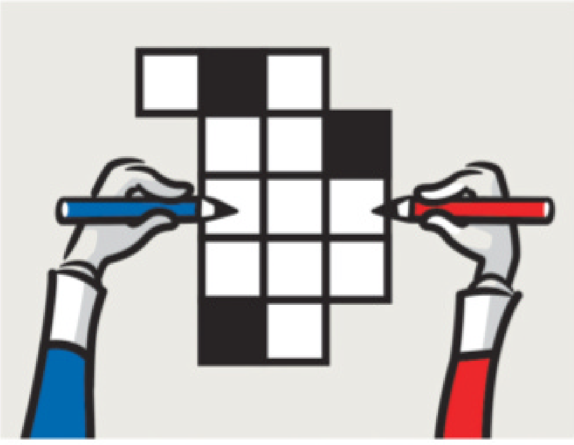
John Freeman (*Poem, p. 38*) edits the literary annual *Freeman's* and is the author of, most recently, "Dictionary of the Undoing." His new poetry collection, "The Park," comes out next month.

Owen Smith (*Cover*), an illustrator, is the chair of the illustration program at California College of the Arts.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

The coronavirus is transforming Hart Island, New York City's public burial ground. Daniel A. Gross reports.



PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

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THE MAIL

THE LONG GAME

Susan B. Glasser, in her piece about the Republican operative Sarah Longwell, writes that Longwell, unlike many Republicans, "did not make her accommodations, political and moral, with the new President" ("Hope Dies Last," March 30th). Although Longwell is certainly resisting Donald Trump now, she is still a member of the party that made his ascendancy possible.

The G.O.P. that Longwell joined at the turn of the twenty-first century was the same party that welcomed white people who resented Lyndon B. Johnson's civil-rights legislation. It also ignored the AIDS epidemic, which killed hundreds of thousands of mostly gay, black, brown, and poor Americans. Ronald Reagan pushed to deregulate corporations and slash taxes for the wealthy, intensifying inequality. He also courted the religious right, which roundly rejects scientific truths, and he used racist dog whistles, such as the term "welfare queen." In the early two-thousands, George W. Bush's Administration chipped away at abortion rights and established ineffectual, abstinence-only sex education.

The truth is that the Republican Party has been the sanctuary of a small, vocal, and increasingly reactionary slice of the American electorate for more than fifty years. What did Longwell think would happen when a white alleged billionaire promised to "make America great again" by deporting Mexicans, banning Muslims, and curtailing women's reproductive autonomy? Trump may have reaped the harvest, but the G.O.P. tilled the ground and planted the seeds.

Ebony Edwards-Ellis
New York City

TOILET-PAPER MUSINGS

As a retired doctor who is occasionally involved in clinical research, I was interested in Henry Alford's analysis of toilet-paper panic hoarding (The Talk of the Town, March 30th). His article and my own observation of similar panics in France suggest that toilet-paper shortages are a trend in the West. Data on the usage of toilet paper in Asian countries during the pandemic would help determine whether such hoarding is a phenomenon elsewhere in the world. In any case, this crisis provides a unique opportunity to compare how objective factors (like housing, environment, and access to goods) and subjective factors (like education levels, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions) influence toilet-paper panics. It may sound a bit silly, but this information would be useful not only to scientists and psychiatrists but also to toilet-paper manufacturers, distributors, and consumers across the globe.

Jean-Claude Roujeau
Châtenay-Malabry, France

Alford's piece reminded me of my time teaching in post-Soviet Russia during the economic depression there in the nineteen-nineties, a collapse that makes our recent stock-market downturn look like a blip. In Russia, there wasn't enough toilet paper to hoard. When I recall how much time we spent every day trying to find just one or two rolls, I wonder how we got anything else done. The only kind that was available was rough and gray, and it was not perforated into individual sheets. At the university where I taught, there was no toilet paper at all; instead, old textbooks on Marxism-Leninism were "repurposed" in the restrooms, one book per stall. You simply tore off the number of pages you needed, then consigned them to the sewer pipe—rather than to the dustbin—of history.

Sharon Hudgins
McKinney, Texas

•

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PROMOTION

THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE FIELD.

GQ SPORTS

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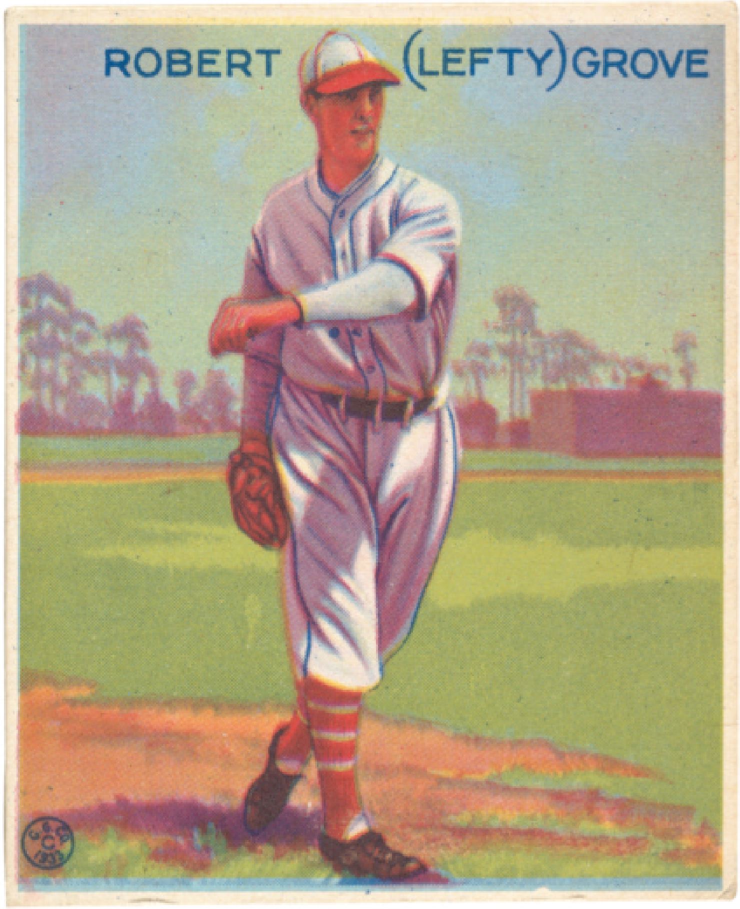
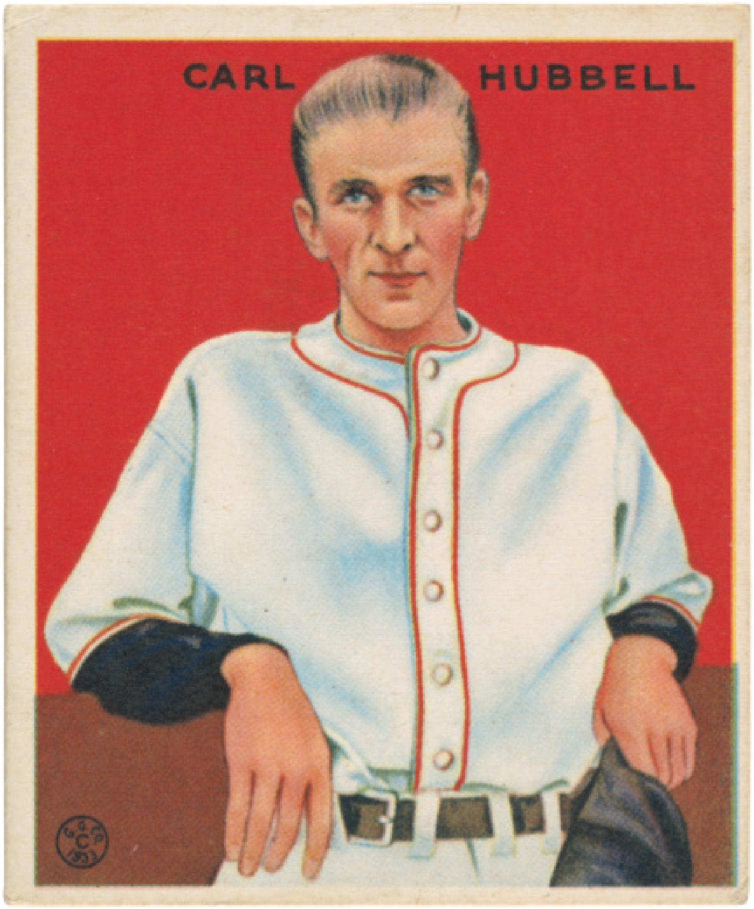
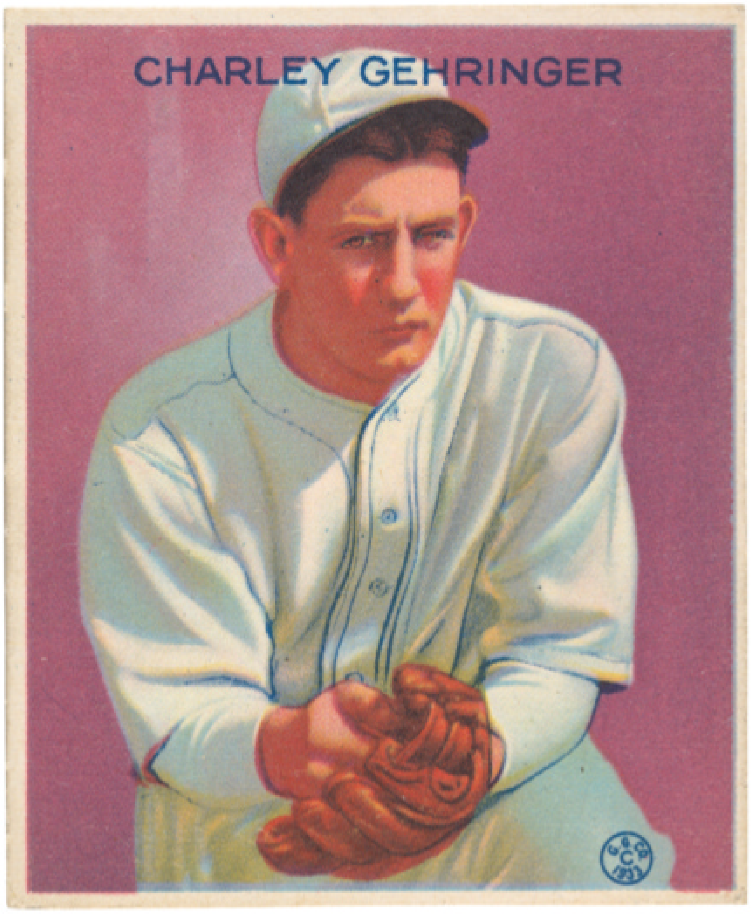
In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

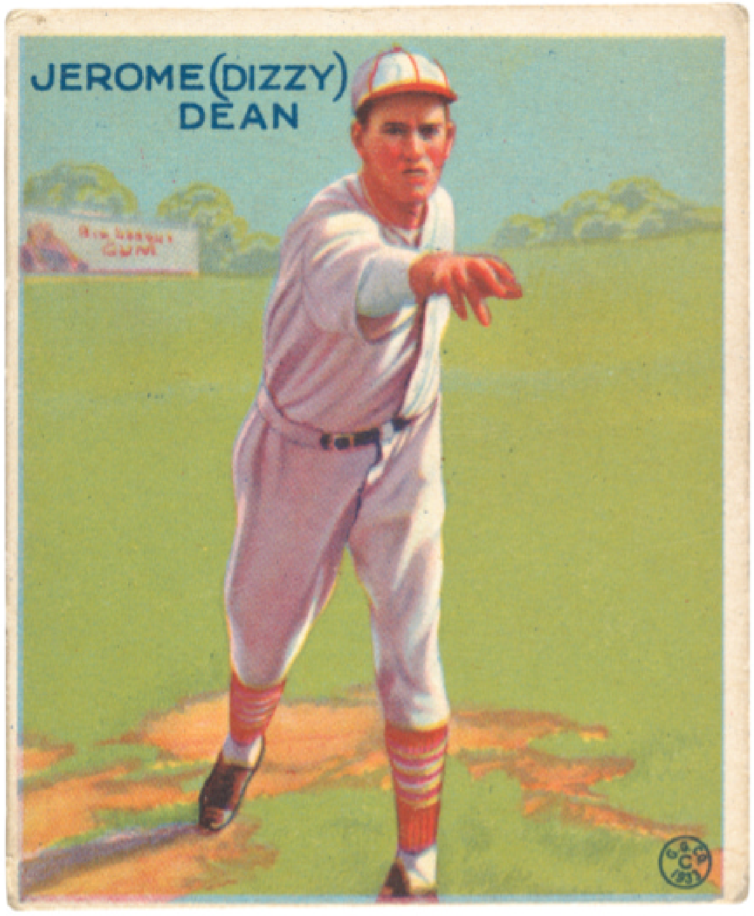
APRIL 15 – 21, 2020

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN









Baseball games are on hold until further notice, but fans can delve into the history of America's favorite pastime via a surprising source—**MetMuseum.org.** The Metropolitan Museum owns thirty thousand vintage baseball cards, and fifteen thousand of them are online (including the four above, from 1933). They were donated by Jefferson R. Burdick, a New York electrician who died in 1963. Although it's believed that Burdick never attended a game, he invented a catalogue system that's still used by collectors today.

MUSIC

Flat Worms: "Antarctica"

PUNK A basic tenet of high-octane rock music is to make as disobedient a racket as possible, preferably in the least amount of time. Certain arty corners of punk rock add an ambitious proviso: create this din while appearing well read. Los Angeles's Flat Worms have spent the four years since their 2016 début attempting this balancing act; on their latest LP, "Antarctica," the musicians simultaneously evoke madmen barrelling down a hill and intellectuals enduring the spiritual assaults of grotesque capitalism. The trio have long been championed by Ty Segall, the garage-rock aesthete whose GOD? Records imprint is releasing "Antarctica," and here they gain another prominent indie co-conspirator—the recording engineer Steve Albini, who robs the musicians of their fuzz to underline a brittle instrumental sizzle. The streamlined sound trains ears to Will Ivy's vaguely dystopian lyrics, involving scorched empires and flamboyant loneliness. ("This is a town where no one else lives—it's Antarctica.") Though recorded last year, Ivy's words resonate in the current one. After all, to a punk, the world is forever on the brink of ruin.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Irreversible Entanglements: "Who Sent You?"

JAZZ Like much else in jazz, righteous anger expressed in poetry has its traditions. Moor Mother, the spoken-word artist who electrifies Irreversible Entanglements's new album, "Who Sent You?," might find antecedents in Amiri Baraka's incendiary "Black Dada Nihilismus," which appeared on the free-jazz attack that was the New York Art Quartet's self-titled début album, from 1964. But America, no matter the era, never suffers any shortage of societal outrage to inspire poets, and Moor Mother has plenty to say. She dominates the album with her observations on racial iniquity, weaving her words among the goading rhythms laid down by the bassist Luke Stewart and the drummer Tcheser Holmes and the sparse yet pointed melodic lines of the saxophonist Keir Neuringer and the trumpeter Aquiles Navarro. Yet her strength lies in her restraint; she largely lets her knifelike verses, rather than any extreme vocal force, do the slashing.—*Steve Futterman*

Jennifer Koh: "Alone Together"

CHAMBER MUSIC The violinist Jennifer Koh has earned a sterling reputation for her commanding technique, but the ingenuity of her programming and commissioning initiatives also merits attention. Her live-stream series, "Alone Together," reflects conditions born of the COVID-19 pandemic—specifically, forced isolation and economic hardship. Koh asked twenty-one prominent composers whose ties to universities or other institutions provide them with financial stability to donate a new thirty-second piece for solo violin. Each then named a freelance composer to receive a paid commission from Koh's nonprofit, ARCO Collaborative. Koh presents the succinct works on her Instagram and Facebook pages on Saturday nights, and then archives the performances on her YouTube channel. The next program offers world premières by two highly visible creators, Jen Shyu and Nina C. Young, and by the colleagues they selected, inti figgis-vizueta and Adeliia Faizullina, respectively.—*Steve Smith (April 18 at 7.)*

Ambar Lucid: "Garden of Lucid"

INDIE POP Ambar Lucid was eighteen when she began releasing earnest, inward-looking dream pop, full of precocious observations about her relationships and her childhood. Her song "A letter to my younger self," from 2018, reads like a handwritten page torn from a journal: Lucid sings about a wrenching period of loneliness after her father was deported from the United States. Although her reflections were perceptive, her delivery was slightly wide-eyed. That's changed with her début album, "Garden of Lucid." From the first track, an atmospheric ballad called "Garden," her voice is deeper, more resonant, more commanding. She uses this newfound vocal strength to play with different sounds, trying her hand at soaring, upbeat pop on "Story to Tell," a song on which she cheerfully declares, "The sky's no longer gray."—*Julyssa Lopez*

Minor Science: "Second Language"

I.D.M. Techno music is escapist by nature—it's dance-floor-ready science fiction that often focusses on celestial synthesizers—but it can also give off a strong sense of interiority. The London electronic-dance producer Angus Finlayson's music, released under the moniker Minor Science, is a good example. He crafts tracks that have a surround-sound spatiality, but his début album, "Second Language," works in approachable miniature, coming in at a trim thirty-seven minutes. Spanning several subgenres—electro, footwork, drum and bass, and armchair I.D.M.—the tracks' rhythms amble as much as they trot. His compositions frequently zag when you expect them to zig, delaying their climactic moments—an enticing approach that delivers on the tease.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

"Nightly Met Opera Streams"

OPERA After the Met was forced to cancel the balance of its season as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the company turned to its overfull vault of live movie-theatre transmissions and launched a series of nightly screenings on its Web site. The next seven days' offerings may

ELECTRO-POP

The days of dance-pop divas being dismissed as commercial products are largely gone, but on **Dua Lipa's** new album, "Future Nostalgia," the London-born songbird is gunning for more than grudging acceptance. Indeed, when she won Best New Artist at the Grammys, last year, she used her speech to savage the Recording Academy's outgoing president, who had remarked that female artists needed to "step up" their efforts in order to earn recognition. Lipa continues to body-slam the chauvinists on "Future Nostalgia," with taut disco and funk-lite tracks that use rubbery bass lines to reinforce her dusky alto and cheeky lyrics. Like a torch singer on the offensive, she brings the fight to former lovers, industry executives, and even outmoded ideas about sexual assault. Lipa, who poses in the driver's seat on the album's cover, doesn't take her foot off the gas—or cede control—for thirty-seven minutes of high-powered synth pop.—*Oussama Zahr*

OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART / THE JEFFERSON R. BURDICK COLLECTION / GIFT OF JEFFERSON R. BURDICK; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD A. CHANCE

ARTISTS TO WATCH

ILLUSTRATION BY ABBEY LOSSING

Ten days after 9/11, when people's spirits desperately needed a lift, PBS aired the first episode of "Art in the Twenty-first Century," a fly-on-the-wall documentary series that bet (with all due respect to Sister Wendy) that artists are the best guides to their own work. Maya Lin, Sally Mann, and Kerry James Marshall were among those who welcomed cameras into their studios for the first season. So did the sculptor Andrea Zittel, whose functional sleeping pods in the California desert now look like enviable spots to shelter in place. Today, after nine broadcast seasons—a tenth arrives later this year—two Peabody Awards, an Emmy nomination, and many digital-only shorts produced for its Web site, **Art 21** is streaming more than five hundred films at art21.org. Subjects range from household names (Marina Abramović and Ai Weiwei) to young painters on the rise (Aliza Nisenbaum, Avery Singer) to the Bay Area-based social-practice artist Stephanie Syjuco, whose latest project is sewing COVID-19 masks for food-bank volunteers, the families of medical workers, and others in need. Art 21 also bundles its films into visual "playlists," with running times of one to two hours; to combat cabin fever, watch fourteen artists take to the open road in "En Route."—*Andrea K. Scott*

as well be subtitled "Diva Week," with Angela Gheorghiu in "La Rondine" (April 15), Anna Netrebko in "Adriana Lecouvreur" (April 18), and Renée Fleming in "Der Rosenkavalier" (April 19). Each weekend, viewers can cast their vote, on the Met's Facebook and Instagram pages, for the opera to be shown the following Friday; streams are available for twenty-three hours.—*Oussama Zahr (April 15-21 at 7:30.)*

ART

Gerhard Richter

The shock of eight new abstractions titled "Birkenau," based on clandestine photographs that were smuggled out of Auschwitz in 1944, retroactively exposes a thread of sorrow and guilt in the invariably subtle work of this German painter. (The Met Breuer's Richter exhibition, "Painting After All," is now closed, but there's a virtual version online.) Who dares take history's ultimate obscenity as a theme for art? For Richter, the provocation makes biographical sense. Born in Dresden in 1932, he is haunted by memories and associations from the Third Reich and the Second World War. Previously indirect in his references to the horror, he has reason to focus on it now: this might be the last show of his six-decade career as a chameleon stylist and a visual philosopher of painting. Richter brings to everything an attitude of radical skepticism, but it has dawned on many of us, over the years, that plenty of emotion, like banked fire, underlies his restless ways. While never forsaking representation—as seen in portraits of his wife and their children, which radiate Titianesque color—he took up chromatic abstraction in the seventies, overlaying brushed, slathered, and scraped swaths of paint. Miraculously, often staggeringly beautiful, those pictures provide the chief pleasures here.—*Peter Schjeldahl (metmuseum.org)*

Srijon Chowdhury

In Chowdhury's eerily beautiful world, the mythic and the contemporary merge. The Bangladeshi painter, who now divides his time between Portland, Oregon, and L.A., channels the macabre effervescence of Odilon Redon in the centerpiece of his New York début, at Foxy Production (viewable on the gallery's Web site). Titled "Pale Rider," the canvas recasts the fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse as a woman on a spectral mount; the incongruous backdrop of vibrant wildflowers behind a lattice of text takes some cues from the Viennese Secessionists. (Size doesn't translate onscreen, but it's worth noting that the picture is sixteen feet long.) Other paintings, including a still-life of clementines, a nighttime view of Notre Dame, and portraits—of a father and child, a female Narcissus in jeans, and a Christlike male nude holding a glowing rose—seductively blur gender roles and art-historical lexicons.—*Johanna Fateman (foxyproduction.com)*

Jeanette Mundt

As New York City's resourceful small galleries launch online viewing rooms, Company's is notably chic. The New York painter Jeanette Mundt, whose renditions of female gymnasts impressed at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, is represented there with her ominous pictures of crows; you can also view her recent exhibition, which was cut short by the pandemic. The theme of fire unites scattershot subjects and styles, and Mundt's feverish palette feels suited to the present moment. In one picture, a person runs through an impressionistically rendered blaze; another evokes Joan of Arc with a beatific woman's face veiled in flames. The title of the series, "Still American," suggests an underlying political critique, one made all the more strange and compelling for being open-ended. The gallery is also hosting "In Company With," a charmingly anarchic digital event series featuring performances and readings on Instagram Live and films by artists (including Raúl de Nieves and Barbara Hammer) on Vimeo.—*J.F. (companygallery.us)*

Brandon Ndife

The title of this young sculptor's new series, "My Zone," seems clairvoyant in hindsight: Ndife's show at the Bureau gallery was slated to open on March 20, the same day that New York's nonessential businesses were ordered to close. Since then, his otherworldly amalgams of the man-made and the organic have languished alone. (You can visit them in the gallery's viewing room, bureau-inc.com, and you should, but know that seeing sculpture remotely can be a frustratingly disembodied experience.) The tone of Ndife's work is oracular, too, as cabinets and shelves, both built by the artist and salvaged, appear under siege by nature, bulging with corn husks, algae, elm roots, and dirt alongside abandoned dish racks and plates. The mood splits the difference between transmogrifying and enduring; an alternate title for Ndife's show might be "Change Is Inevitable." These furniture-sculptures have the talismanic power of Congolese *nkisi* figures, which incorporate seeds, nuts, and plants, and the same restless, phantasmagoric energy that led the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara to write about "the tender light of objects that talk and dream in their sleep."—*Andrea K. Scott (bureau-inc.com)*

PODCASTS

The Other Latif

For years, the "Radiolab" reporter Latif Nasser believed that he was the *only* Latif Nasser. But then he learned about another one. "That other Latif Nasser?" he says, "is Detainee 244 at Guantánamo Bay." (Cue the propulsive doumbek music.) This "Radiolab"-produced series, which Nasser reported for three years, explores the story of Abdul Latif Nasser, a studious Moroccan Muslim from a loving suburban family who, after cryptic adventures abroad in young adulthood, ended up at Guantánamo, uncharged and untried—and has remained there for eighteen years. Nasser plunges listeners into post-9/11 legal paradoxes; investigates matters in Casablanca, Cuba, Afghanistan, and Sudan, including Osama bin Laden's former sunflower farm; and interviews everyone from Nasser's relatives and defense attorneys to the rueful general who built Guantánamo. Though a reining in of gee-whiz "Radiolab" aesthetics would have improved it, "The Other Latif" is a magisterial, emotionally compelling feat of reporting, with countless chilling takeaways.—*Sarah Larson*

Telescope

In a moment when people and podcasts are abruptly refocussing, this new series, from the Los Angeles-based producer Jonathan Hirsch ("Dear Franklin Jones") and his company Neon Hum, manages to show the long view and the granular at once: each episode features a thoughtfully produced story, reported by Hirsch and his team, that homes in on the experiences of individuals now. (Call it "This Pandemic Life.") Among them: Thomas, a laid-off set dresser in Hollywood ("Maybe eventually I'll start working at a grocery store"); Drew, just out of jail and stuck inside ("Everyone's now kind of experientially on my level"); and Eric, long known as the Pied Piper of Pasadena, who aims, by playing the recorder in his car, to "recalibrate people for a moment." The Pied Piper drops some of the series' heaviest wisdom: "What we need to get out of this fix is to communicate," he says—even if it's with a plastic recorder at a stoplight. "It seems too simple, but it's true."—*S.L.*

DANCE

Martha Graham Dance Company

On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, America's oldest modern-dance troupe has been presenting "Martha Matinées" on its YouTube channel. Alongside recorded performances, the company's artistic director, Janet Eilber, and many generations of Graham dancers sheltering around the globe chime in, via live chat, with illuminating facts, insights, and anecdotes. It's fun to watch with them. On April 15 and April 18 (the company's ninety-fourth birthday), the feature is "Appalachian Spring," probably Graham's best-loved work. This vision of pioneer America, austerely yet tenderly balancing hope against fear, was made in 1944, a time of crisis. The footage screened here, in its hard-to-find complete form, is of a theatre performance by the original cast, including Graham in her prime and a very young Merce Cunningham. For maximum impact, the silent film has been synched with the dance's great Copland score.—*Brian Seibert*

Merce Cunningham for All

Merce Cunningham, who died in 2009, would have been a hundred and one on April 16. It's a perfect excuse—as if we needed one—to catch Alla Kovgan's excellent film "Cunningham," released last year and now available for streaming. Originally shot in 3-D, the movie shows, often up close, the rigor, power, and raw excitement of Cunningham's dances in a variety of settings: the courtyard of a palace, the top of a skyscraper, a forest clearing. You can't take your eyes off the dancers, or quite believe what they're doing with their bodies. The events surrounding Cunningham's centenary, last year, also included a trio of synchronized performances—one in London, one in L.A., and one in New York—in which dancers performed a total of a hundred solos created by Cunningham in the course of his career, which began in the nineteen-fifties. The dances were arranged into a sort of symphony, unspooling in overlapping waves across the various stages. All three performances, collectively titled "Night of 100 Solos," can be watched on the Merce Cunningham Trust's Vimeo page, at vimeo.com/mercecunninghamtrust.—*Marina Harss*

OntheBoards.tv

Since 2010, the Web site run by On the Boards theatre, in Seattle, has been amassing an unsurpassed collection of high-quality, full-length, streamable recordings of American contemporary dance. It's all free through the end of April, although you are encouraged to pay a small fee, half of which goes to the artists. The best selections include Beth Gill's mesmerizing "Electric Midwife," Tere O'Connor's masterly and mystifying "Bleed," Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born's haunting "Bronx Gothic," Kyle Abraham's civil-rights-era-inspired "When the Wolves Came In," and Ralph Lemon's elusive but suddenly timely "How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?"—*B.S. (www.ontheboards.tv)*

Paul Taylor Dance Company

Now that we're stuck at home, we can catch up on all the documentaries—including dance documentaries—that we've been promising ourselves we'll get to for years. There are some really good ones out there, including "Dancemaker," a 1998 film by Matthew Diamond that tracks the creation of Paul Taylor's tango-inflected work "Piazzolla Caldera." The footage recorded in the studio is especially fascinating. Taylor, then sixty-seven, laconically directs his dancers, asking them to try this, then that, until they hit upon something that works. He calls it "fooling around," but it's clear just how much concentration, and sweat, goes into each phrase, each transition. The film is available on the company's YouTube page, along with a recording of his 1965 work "From Sea to Shining Sea"—a stinging satire of the American mythos, featuring a bedraggled Lady Liberty, a hapless Superman, and a tough-acting all-American cowboy—and a short documentary on its 2014 revival, on the occasion of the company's sixtieth anniversary.—*M.H.*

MOVIES

Anvil! The Story of Anvil

Anybody schooled in "This Is Spinal Tap" could be forgiven for assuming that there was no further amusement, let alone rarer emotions, to be mined from heavy metal. Somehow, though, Sacha Gervasi's documentary digs deep into a real-life case—the attempted res-

THEATRE ONLINE

ILLUSTRATION BY BARBARA OTT

New York's downtown-theatre scene is used to making fabulous things happen despite inhospitable circumstances (rising rents, janky venues). Now, with live performance shut down and the theatrical economy in tatters, some of the city's creative misfits are banding together. **The Trickle Up** is an online artists' network that includes more than fifty downtown luminaries, among them the performance artist Taylor Mac, the burlesque star Dirty Martini, the puppeteer Basil Twist, the cabaret queen Bridget Everett, the actor André De Shields, and the playwrights Annie Baker, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Lynn Nottage. Each is contributing three original videos to the project, at trickleupnyc.org, which is accessible for a fee of ten dollars a month, and will benefit artists living below the poverty line.—*Michael Schulman* urrection of Anvil, a band that was founded in the early nineteen-seventies and banged heads with fame in the eighties—to emerge with a saga of devotion and perseverance that's both touching and absurd. Gervasi is especially fortunate to have the founding fathers of the group, Robb Reiner and Steve (Lips) Kudlow, now in creased middle age, to guide us through its many downs and very occasional ups. The action stretches from the band's native Canada to Transylvania, via Japan and Stonehenge. By the end, to our surprise, we mind very much whether the fortunes of Anvil are set to soar or doomed to lurch once more; if most of its music sounds like a fight in a lumber mill, who cares? Released in 2009.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/27/09.) (Streaming on Amazon.)*

Columbus

The title of Kogonada's intellectually passionate drama, from 2017, refers to the Indiana city that's home to a surprising abundance of modern architectural masterworks. Those buildings fire the imagination of a twentyish woman named Casey (Haley Lu Richardson), who's stuck there. Spurning college to care for her mother (Michelle Forbes), who's a recovering drug addict, Casey works at the local library. When Jin (John Cho), an architectural historian's son, comes to town, he stokes an outpouring of her pent-up ideas about architecture and tries to help her change her life. Richardson's hyperalert performance has a rare dialectical ardor; her avid gaze at the city's landmarks is matched by Kogonada's own images, which capture the virtual libido of aesthetic sensibility. Filming Casey and Jin beside the buildings that inspire them, he revels in the power of contemplative companionship—of looking, talking, thinking together—and unfolds the wonder of an artistic coming of age. With Rory Culkin, as Casey's colleague, and Parker Posey, as Jin's longtime friend.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.)*

Creed

This stirring, heartfelt, rough-grained reboot of the "Rocky" series is directed by Ryan Coogler, who also wrote the story. It starts in a Los Angeles juvenile-detention center, where young Adonis Johnson is confined. He's soon adopted by Mary Anne Creed (Phylicia Rashad), Apollo's widow, who informs him that the late boxer was his father. As an adult, Adonis (played by Michael B. Jordan) defies Mary Anne to pursue a boxing career, moving to Philadelphia to be trained by Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), his father's rival. The burly backstory and the weight of personal history don't stall the drama but, rather, provide its fuel. Coogler—aided by the cinematographer Maryse Alberti's urgent long takes—links the physical sacrifices of boxing and acting. Adonis also finds romance with the rising singer Bianca (played with febrile passion by Tessa Thompson), who has physical struggles of her own. Coogler ingeniously turns the myth of bootstrap-tugging exertions on its head: without family and connections, the new boxing star wouldn't stand a fighting chance. Released in 2015.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Google Play, and other services.)*

Dance, Girl, Dance

Dorothy Arzner's 1940 melodrama spotlights two dancers from a scuffling New York troupe—Bubbles (Lucille Ball), a brazen gold-digger, and Judy (Maureen O'Hara), a serious ballet student who dreams of high art and true love. Bubbles steals Judy's rich beau and then steals a job from her, as a bump-and-grind dancer in a burlesque show. What's more, as a cruel joke, Bubbles brings Judy into the act for boorish spectators to catcall—but Judy boldly turns the tables on her tormentors. Arzner films dance with sharp psychological nuance, looking with rapt admiration at the ballet and highlighting the obscene slobbering of men at the burlesque. These female artists face the crisscrossing conflicts of art versus commerce and romance versus lust. Arzner's idealistic paean to the higher realms of creative and romantic fulfillment is harshly realistic about the degradations that women endure in entertainment—including the cinema itself. With Maria Ouspenskaya, as the clear-eyed dance teacher fallen from artistic heights.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

Tucker: The Man and His Dream

This bright-toned and dynamic drama, from 1988—based on the true story of the automotive visionary Preston Tucker—displays Francis Ford Coppola's artistry boldly and poignantly. The action starts in 1945, when Tucker (played with brash and good-humored verve by Jeff Bridges), a military contractor in Ypsilanti, Michigan, launches a daring plan to create a new kind of car that will compete with Detroit's Big Three automakers. He's joined by a New York investment banker (Martin Landau), a trio of brilliant engineers (Mako, Elias Koteas, and Frederic Forrest), and family members—his wife, Vera (Joan Allen), and his son, Preston, Jr. (Christian Slater). Much of the movie focusses on Tucker's clashes with financiers and established business interests—and on the burden that his family bears. (Tucker's quest resembles Coppola's troubles with his own studio.) The film gleams with the allure of lacquered sheet metal and hurtles forward with the supercharged art and refined science of industrial movie craft, which Coppola and his crew imaginatively reinvigorate.—*R.B. (Streaming on Hulu, Amazon, and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
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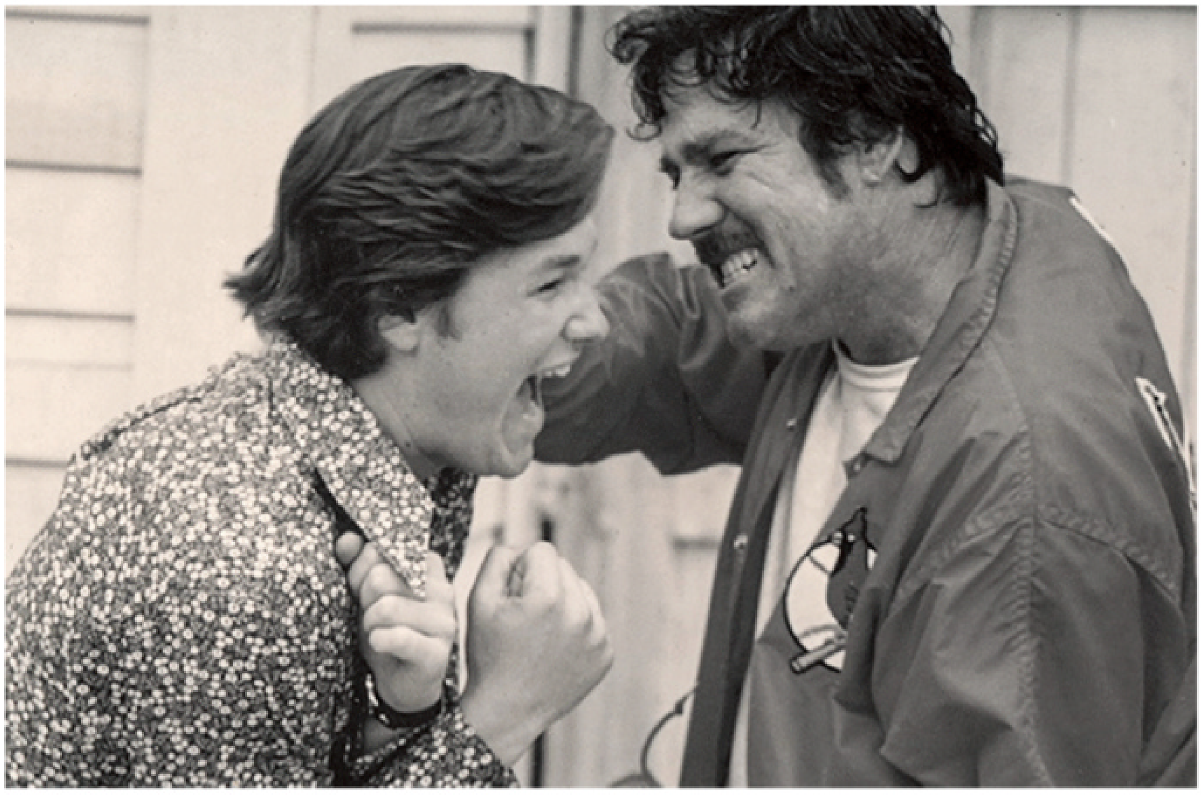
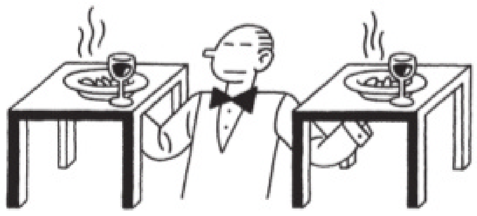
WHAT TO STREAM



COURTESY NETFLIX

With this year's Tribeca Film Festival postponed and the baseball season delayed, it's worth revisiting the zesty documentary **"The Battered Bastards of Baseball,"** about the joy and the business of the game, which screened at the festival in 2014. (It's now streaming on Netflix.) Fittingly, its subject unites sports and movies—it's centered on Bing Russell, a film and TV actor who, in 1973, at the end of a twelve-year run in supporting roles on the Western series "Bonanza," founded the country's only independent minor-league baseball team, the Portland Mavericks. A lifelong baseball obsessive, Russell combined the scouting acumen to field a winning team and the canny showmanship to turn games into events—and reaped local success, national celebrity, and aggressive pushback from Major League Baseball. His son, the actor Kurt Russell, also played for the Mavericks, and is one of the movie's main interview subjects, whose reminiscences—interwoven by the directors, the brothers Chapman and Maclain Way, with tangy archival footage—resound with the hearty wonder of a modern-day folktale.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Jalsa Grill & Gravy

964 Coney Island Ave., Brooklyn

"I'm a chaat person," explained Nowshin Ali the other day, over FaceTime. We were discussing the menu at Jalsa Grill & Gravy, the restaurant she co-owns with her business partner, Anurag Shrivastava, in Brooklyn's Little Pakistan, south of Prospect Park. Ali and Shrivastava met while co-managing a nearby Afghani restaurant; in 2018, they opened their own place, featuring the food of their native India. For Ali, who immigrated to the U.S. with her young son in 2013, this means the signature dishes of Lucknow, her home town, including chaats and biryani.

Chaats are defined on Jalsa's menu as well as I've ever seen: "crispy-crunchy-spicy-tangy Indian snacks." In India, they're often sold on the street; in the U.S., they're treated like appetizers. Was I a chaat person before I tried Jalsa's iterations? I'd always enjoyed them, but I don't remember ever crowing in pleasure the way I did after taking a bite of Shrivastava's palak chaat: a pile of spinach—lightly battered in chickpea flour, warm yet nearly raw, bright green and refreshing—tossed with glossy tamarind sauce, house-made chaat masala, crispy shards of lentil noodle, onion, tomato, and cilantro.

I had planned to visit Jalsa before the pandemic, at the passionate urging of two friends who live near the restaurant. Instead, Jalsa came to me; it remains open for takeout and delivery. And how could it not? Ali and Shrivastava are not much for sitting still. Before the crisis, they were also running a nonprofit, supplemented by their income from the restaurant, called People in Need, which provides an after-school program for neighborhood children and workshops for empowering immigrant women.

The after-school program is currently closed, but People in Need is helping to facilitate remote learning, as well as getting groceries to locals who are incapacitated or just hard on their luck—a cabdriver suddenly without passengers, a doctor's office receptionist without patients. In recent weeks, many food-oriented businesses have pivoted toward community service, finding ways to feed hospital staffs and people who have lost their jobs. In Little Pakistan, the precedent stretches back years. The Council of Peoples Organization (COPO), which has offered legal services to South Asian and Muslim immigrants since 2002, was born out of the neighborhood's first Pakistani grocery store.

Normally, Ali and Shrivastava share cooking duties with Varun Patri, a chef with twenty-three years of experience. Because Patri lives in New Jersey, he's been unable to come to work and prepare the dishes for which he's usually responsible. "So he's telling us everything over the phone, what to do," Ali told me. They were fast learners: the cubes of fresh paneer I ordered the other night were curdy and light, slicked in a luscious makhani sauce, made with tomato, heavy cream, and onion caramelized in butter.

I ate my paneer makhani with a thrillingly bitter lime pickle; with yellow shahi rice, steamed in chicken stock and turmeric; with gobi ka keema, a mix of minced cauliflower and bell peppers cooked down until it's sweet and paste-like, punctuated by the gentle crunch of freshly ground whole spices. I drizzled tamarind sauce over bronzed, sharp-edged samosas filled simply with soft potato flecked with fennel seeds. One morning, I enjoyed the last bites of Ali's spicy dum biryani straight from the refrigerator for breakfast.

When I asked her about the future of Jalsa, Ali told me that she couldn't imagine the restaurant closing. "We will put our life into it," she said. She told me about a mother in the neighborhood who was sick with COVID-19 and quarantined from her children in their small apartment. The mother had been rising at 5 A.M. each day to cook for her family, sanitizing the kitchen before the kids woke up. "They talk through the door," Ali said. "It's heartbreaking. So I've been sending them cooked food from Jalsa." *(Dishes $7-$15.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYOKO HAMADA FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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E-maxi S&G 100 Large Cap Bond CHL(OCT 18)
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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE POLITICS OF THE VIRUS

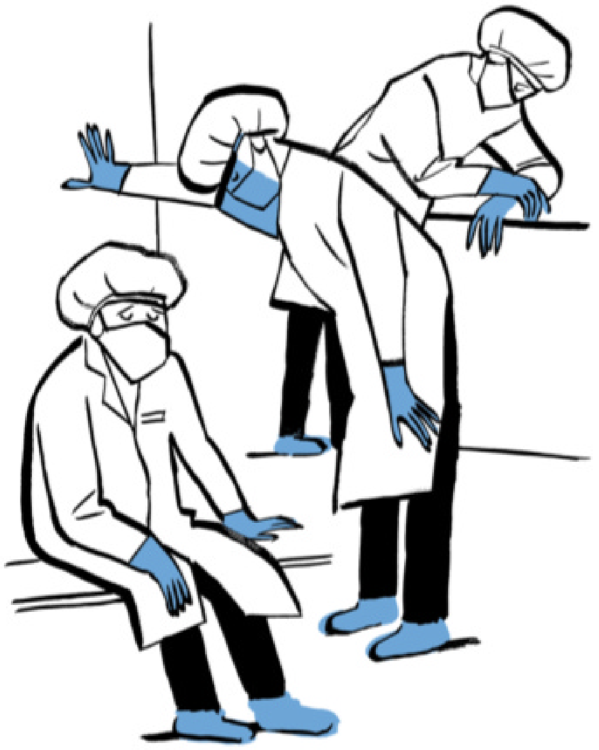
When has New York known a grimmer week? The sirens are unceasing. Funeral parlors are overwhelmed. Refrigerator trailers are now in service as morgues, and can be found parked outside hospitals all over town. We're told that there are "glimmers of hope," that hospital admissions are slowing, that the curve is flattening. Yet the misery is far from over. "The bad news isn't just bad," New York's governor, Andrew Cuomo, said at one of his briefings last week. "The bad news is actually terrible."

Across the country, the coronavirus continues to ravage the confined and the vulnerable, from inmates of the Cook County jail, in Chicago, to workers at the Tyson Foods poultry plant in Camilla, Georgia. Data from a variety of reliable sources show that African-Americans, who suffer disproportionately from poverty, inadequate housing, limited access to good health care, and chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension, are dying from COVID-19 at horrific rates.

The pandemic is an event in the natural history of our species, but it is also a political episode. Its trajectory is shaped by policy measures specific to particular governments. The fact that the United States is experiencing tremendous losses—that it has far more COVID-19 cases than any other country in the world—relates to a number of collective risk factors and preëxisting conditions. The most notable one is to be found in the Oval Office.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

"This is not the apocalypse," President Barack Obama assured his shell-shocked staff members the morning after Donald Trump's election. When, the next day, Obama received Trump at the White House and tried to relay information about a range of issues—the threat from North Korea, the Iran nuclear deal, immigration, health care—he got nowhere. Trump wanted to talk about himself and the size of his campaign rallies. Obama spoke about the value of having at his side such people as his homeland-security adviser, Lisa Monaco, citing her insistence on bringing him unvarnished, unwelcome news about everything from terrorism to the Ebola crisis. In the White House, she was known as Dr. Doom. Trump replied that maybe he *should* hire a Dr. Doom; he was joking. From the beginning, he practiced social distancing from anyone who told him what he didn't want to hear.



And here we are, playing a tragic game of catch-up against a virus that has killed thousands and left millions unemployed. At Trump's State of the Union address on February 4th, he pledged, "My Administration will take all necessary steps to safeguard our citizens from this threat." Three weeks later, Kayleigh McEnany, a loud promoter of birtherism and of Trump talking points during the 2016 campaign, cheerfully told the Fox Business audience, "We will not see diseases like the coronavirus come here, we will not see terrorism come here, and isn't that refreshing when contrasting it with the awful Presidency of President Obama?" Now McEnany is the President's press secretary.

The coronavirus has inflicted a level of pain that is deep and global. And yet many nations, from South Korea to Germany, have done far better at responding to it than the United States has. The reasons for the American failing include a lack of preparation, delayed mobilization, insufficient testing, and a reluctance to halt travel. The Administration, from its start, has waged war on science and expertise and on what Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon called "the administrative state." The results are all around us. Trump has made sure that a great nation is peculiarly vulnerable to a foreseeable public-health calamity.

If the death rate turns out to be less than the initial forecasts—and, please, let it be so—it will be thanks to the discipline of the public and the heroics of first responders, not the foresight or the leadership of the President. The knowledge that we are led so ineptly and with such brazen self-regard is humiliating to millions of American citizens, if not to their leader. Trump gives himself "a ten" for his performance and berates any reporter who dares to challenge that premise. "You should say, 'Congratulations! Great job!'" he told one, "instead of being so horrid in the way you ask the question!"

A nation facing a common threat normally pulls together, but Trump's reflex is always to divide; he has invoked a multiplying litany of enemies. He directs his fire at the Obama Administration, at the World Health Organization, and at governors from Albany to Sacramento, with their constant pleas for ventilators, test kits, and face masks. The Democrats are to blame for everything. Early in the year, as the pandemic grew, they "diverted" the attention of the federal government, because "every day was all about impeachment," as Trump's unfailing loyalist Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, put it.

At a time of medical peril and economic devastation, the President heads to the White House briefing room and frames the terms of his reëlection campaign. It is a campaign of cynicism and authoritarian impulses. To begin with, he has made it clear that he does not approve of efforts to make voting easier in November. Why should he? He takes a dim view of early voting, voting by mail, and same-day registration. Such reforms, he complains, would produce "levels of voting that, if you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

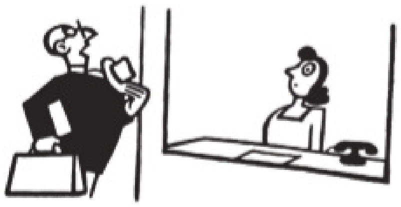
Trump has not had the sort of bounce in the polls usually seen by Presidents during a crisis, but this hardly insures an end to his reign. Senator Bernie Sanders, who did so much to transform the debate over health care, the environment, and education policy, in both the 2016 and 2020 campaigns, has dropped out of the race, and the presumptive Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, has been either absent or woefully inarticulate in recent weeks. The former Vice-President cannot run on the idea of personal decency alone. He needs to provide a vivid, comprehensive plan of renewal equal to the moment. He needs to emphasize hard truths, one being that the laws of science, of the physical world, must be recognized. This pandemic is, in a sense, a rehearsal for what awaits us if we continue to ignore the demands of climate change. Biden would signal a seriousness of intent and offer a convincing alternative if he were to name very soon not only a Vice-Presidential running mate but a set of advisers and Cabinet officers who have shown themselves capable of policy rigor, executive competence, and compassion for the very communities that are suffering most from neglect and mistreatment.

Meanwhile, at the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, a painful reckoning begins. New York has long prided itself on being a sort of cultural and political city-state, able to hold its own against any vagaries emanating from the White House. This is plainly not the case. We are in this together: that is the phrase, the balm, of the moment. But it is more than a cliché. It should be the spirit and the foundation of our national politics, starting with the election in November.

—*David Remnick*

BRONX TRAFFIC

SHOWING THE WAY



Every morning at eight, Maria Lopez sets up a folding table at the entrance of Lincoln Hospital, in the South Bronx. People who visit her table are often scared or angry or both. She wears old sneakers and jeans, with a mask and gloves. Recently, the hospital gave her a pair of goggles. "We get spit at," Lopez said the other day. "We also get cursed at, people flip over the table, you name it."

Lincoln has the busiest emergency department in the city, and Lopez's job is to be a traffic controller. Her responsibilities include anything outside of direct medical care. Each person who comes to the hospital must stop at her table. If people come with coughs, Lopez directs them to a room where they can get tested. Next of kin show up, and Lopez escorts them to where they can identify their loved ones' remains. Women in labor arrive with their families, and Lopez breaks the news that, because of the coronavirus, the mother-to-be must enter alone. Being separated from their relatives is what makes people angriest. "The families mingle outside just to be nearby," Lopez said. "One lady came in yesterday and was crying. Her husband hadn't been feeling good, so he'd been taken in the ambulance. She didn't know anything about his condition. And I told her she could go to Information and see how he's doing. He passed away in the morning, and nobody had notified her. There's so many bodies, too many people."

In normal times, Lopez works as a violence-intervention counsellor and as a youth mentor at the hospital. She lives in Harlem and has four daughters. "When I'm not working, I'm my daughter's manager," she said. "My ten-year-old! She's a rapper. She advocates against bullying." Even before the pandemic, Lopez's work was exhausting. A year and a half ago, she suffered a stroke, even though she is only thirty-eight. When the coronavirus deluge arrived, she volunteered to help however she could. "In the nighttime now, I twist and turn," she said. "I sometimes cry. I have to play Candy Crush on my phone until I fall asleep."

At Lincoln, which treats the poorest area of the city, patients are far more likely to be black or Latino. The coronavirus has hit communities like Lincoln's disproportionately hard. New York City's early data show that black and Latino residents are dying at twice the rate of white New Yorkers.

"There are a lot of trust issues here," Lopez said. "People don't know who to believe now. People speak more Spanish and more African languages than English here, which makes it harder. People are at high risk, with diabetes, heart conditions, asthma, high blood pressure—the chronic stuff. Insurance, especially, is a problem. Everybody that helps the community, their offices are closed. Yesterday, we had a couple of people saying they don't have milk for their babies. And people need food stamps. A lot of people are old, so they don't know how to work the computer. So I just tell them which local schools and churches are giving out food."

Child care is a problem for both the sick and the healthy. "A lot of people come back to the hospital to find out the results of their coronavirus test," Lopez said. "One lady, she came with her two kids, one of them in a stroller. She tested positive, and she had a nervous breakdown. I had to call a family member to come pick up the kids."

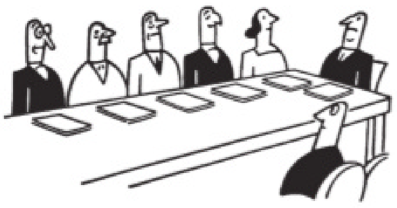
Students in Lopez's mentorship program now take their classes virtually, but some don't have computers. When schools closed, Lopez worked with principals to distribute extras to students who needed them. One of her mentees, a fifteen-year-old named Camilo, was living with his mother and two siblings in a shelter with bad Internet. Camilo's family had one laptop, which wasn't working, and one cell phone, which they shared. "There's this one annoying teacher, the gym teacher, actually—he doesn't understand what everyone is going through," Camilo said. The teacher gave an assignment, and Camilo texted him to say that he'd have to submit it late because he had no Internet access. The teacher never responded, and he docked Camilo twenty-five points for tardiness. When the family spent a night at the apartment of friends, in order to use their Wi-Fi, the shelter kicked them out. They were stuck in a two-bedroom apartment with five other people, until they found a new shelter. Lopez has been trying to locate schools or libraries that might provide Camilo with a working computer.

The hardest part of the job, Lopez said, is knowing that patients are alone. "At first, I couldn't sleep," she said. "Yeah, I've seen gunshots, but it's nothing like seeing these poor bodies dying by themselves."

Lopez grew up in foster care, and she spent time in prison. She said that's why, when the hospital gave her the option of staying home to quarantine, she said no. "I was abandoned. I don't know my birth mother," she said. "So I know how these people feel who are laying down in a bed with nobody beside them." Lopez gives the people she meets her phone number so that they can call her at any hour. "At eight o'clock at night, we take down the table," she said. "Hospital police deal with the rest."

—*Zach Helfand*

PROTOCOLS
WHO GETS A VENTILATOR?

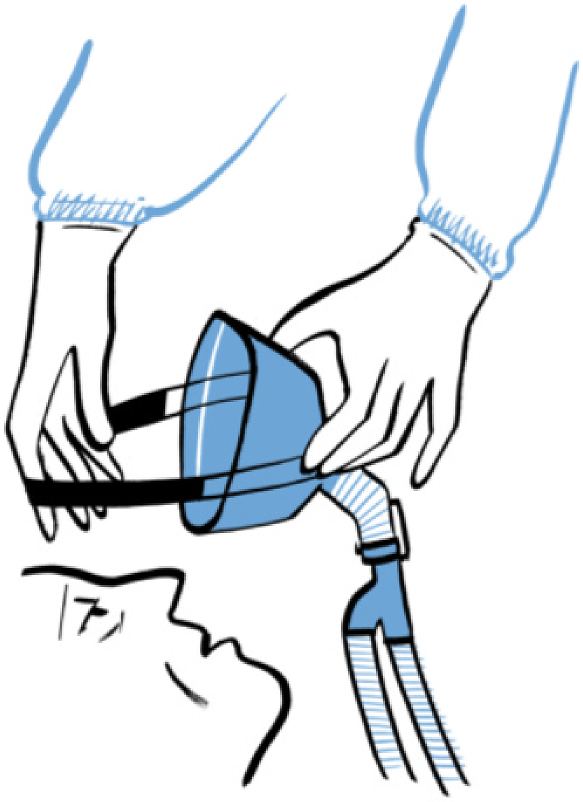


In 1985, Governor Mario Cuomo created the New York State Task Force on Life and the Law, a group of twenty-three experts who would advise the state on ethically tricky public-policy issues. They were doctors, lawyers, professors, reverends, and rabbis. One was Barbara Shack, a lobbyist who had successfully led the effort to legalize abortion in New York. A later addition was Rock Brynner, a historian who had once been Bob Dylan's road manager and Muhammad Ali's bodyguard. The group issued policy recommendations on organ transplantation, the definition of death, and all kinds of things that people hate to talk about. In 2007, the task force took up the subject of ventilators. If New York were to run out, who would get one, and who wouldn't?

The group met regularly for several years, in a conference room at 90 Church Street. "I remember when I first got assigned this," Susie Han, the chair of the ventilator-allocation project, said. "I was, like, This is *insane*." But it wasn't: the task force calculated that, if a Spanish-flu-like pandemic were to occur, New York could be short by nearly sixteen thousand ventilators. The group toyed with different methods of allocation, such as giving out ventilators on a first-come-first-served basis, or distributing them randomly, or prioritizing certain patients (like parents and health-care workers). In 2015, they published a two-hundred-and-seventy-two-page report, which recommended a system that relies on "exclusion criteria"—a list of medical conditions that would make a patient ineligible for a ventilator. In a ventilator-triage plan that Alabama released, in 2010, these criteria included "severe or profound mental retardation" and "moderate to severe dementia." The New York task force's list included traumatic brain injury, severe burns, and cardiac arrest, in cases where a patient has become unresponsive.

Han said that the report was distributed to hospitals, but it received no press coverage at the time. The guidelines got a bit of traction during the Ebola crisis. Then, last month, it was reported that hospitals in Northern Italy had run out of ventilators, and were using age as a standard to allocate machines—an idea that the task force had rejected, because it discriminated against the elderly. It soon became apparent that New York, too, might face an equipment shortage. Samuel Gorovitz, a philosophy professor who has served on the task force since 1988, said that a few members, who had been speaking with one another about the coronavirus, reached out to Howard Zucker, the state's health commissioner. "We said, 'Look, you have this group of people, and we'd love to help,'" Gorovitz said.

Zucker scheduled a conference call with the task force and the heads of a few private hospitals, for March 16th.



Fifteen minutes before the call, without warning, a draft of updated ventilator-allocation guidelines, specific to the COVID-19 crisis, was circulated. "A lot of people didn't even know that this e-mail had been sent," Gorovitz said. Still, he said, of the call, "We had a conversation that had so much momentum in it." In the course of an hour and twenty minutes, they discussed the triage committees that the draft guidelines called for—designated groups of people such as doctors and bioethicists who would essentially decide who lives and who dies. They talked about social justice; Gorovitz suggested that any newly available funding or equipment be distributed in a way that favors poorer, under-resourced hospitals. People liked this idea, but a clinician noted that some of the best-equipped hospitals serve the state's most vulnerable patients, and that it might therefore be better to think about distribution in terms of patient-population vulnerability. Gorovitz said that the draft guidelines proposed a "lottery" when, for example, two patients who were the same age and who had similar health prospects needed a ventilator. "I said, 'O.K., that's good, but it's not sufficiently specific, because lotteries can be biased. What *kind* of lottery?'"

Before the call ended, a health-department official said that the state's guidelines "would be revised substantially in light of this conversation," Gorovitz recalled. The updated draft would be presented to a group of clinicians later that afternoon, before the protocol was finalized. "We anticipated that it would be made public in some final version within a day or two," he said. "But nothing since. Zero." Two weeks later, Gorovitz e-mailed the Department of Health to ask what was going on. "Not even an acknowledgment on the inquiry," he said.

Meanwhile, other states, such as Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, have announced their plans. Both have adopted a point system that prioritizes patients by calculating their likelihood of benefitting from I.C.U. care, and which does not use exclusion criteria to disqualify patients from the outset. (Alabama has removed its ventilator plan from the Internet.) Tia Powell, a physician and a bioethicist who worked on the original guidelines, said that the state has put its health-care workers in a bad position by not issuing any formal protocols. The 2015 guidelines are not binding, which allows for a situation in which NewYork-Presbyterian plays by different rules than Mount Sinai. And, although some hospital systems, such as Northwell Health, which has twenty-three hospitals across the state, have said that they will adopt the guidelines if they run out of equipment, COVID-19 is an illness that the task force did not anticipate. Its original guidelines suggest moving a ventilator from one patient to the next after a hundred and twenty hours—but some coronavirus patients take longer than that to recover.

"There have been efforts in every single facility across the state of New York to devise their own guidance documents," Powell said. "This is an incredible waste of expertise and time—all because of the failure to release a unified guidance document." She added that, although the state has not yet run out of ventilators, front-line staff are making difficult decisions every day when caring for COVID-19 patients. "I feel personally that I've let them down, because I haven't been able to sway the powers that be that they have an obligation to provide guidance to the people who are doing that care."

Will New York release a plan eventually? "I'll just say that it apparently has been a choice not to release any guidance," Powell said. ("We have no guidelines," Gary Holmes, a spokesman for the state's Department of Health, wrote in an e-mail this past Friday.) But, even if the state does, one day, release a plan, this period of uncertainty has already had an impact. Powell explained that doctors have been trying to support patients who have little chance of recovery, such as those who have gone into cardiac arrest. "We're still making attempts for that, because of the lack of guidance from New York State," she said. "It doesn't save a life. It puts our staff at risk. And if the person is in cardiac arrest on a ventilator, if they can still feel something, then they're likely to feel pain. So it creates a bad death."

—*Tyler Foggatt*

DEPT. OF RESILIENCE

PRAY MORE

Father George R. Stewart, the pastor of St. Augustine-Our Lady of Victory Roman Catholic Church, in the South Bronx, knew when he was in the second grade that he would be a priest. He came to this church, whose name can be confusing if you don't notice the hyphen, almost five years ago. Two churches merged to make this one, in 2012. It holds services in Spanish and English, and sometimes partly in Garifuna, the language of an ethnic group of the same name whose principal ancestors were shipwrecked African captives and Caribbean native people. Sometimes when Father Stewart gives a sermon in English, he keeps it short, because when he gets to the end he takes a deep breath and repeats it all in Spanish, or the other way around. Everybody in the church, including the Garifuna members and a large contingent of Nigerians, speaks Spanish or English or both. About sixty per cent of the church's members are Spanish speakers, and, of those, about sixty per cent are from the Dominican Republic.

Public services have been cancelled, but the church is open from six in the morning to four in the afternoon every day. It's an Italianate brick building with an intricate rose window above the front doors, flanked by two smaller windows shaped like crosses. Signs ask parishioners to keep twenty feet apart when they come in to pray. Father Stewart cleans the church three times a day. He disinfects the pews and prayer rails and rubs the door handles with sanitizer. Every evening, he performs Mass online, from his study. "It's been very frustrating," he told a caller who follows his homilies, which are posted on the church's Web site. "I would say that a third of my parishioners are on the front line in this plague, as nurses, hospital workers, or home health aides. But as a priest I am not allowed to take all the risks they're exposed to. I visit the sick at home, in protective gear, but I can't comfort the ones in hospitals or give last rites to the dying—no visitors are allowed."

He went on, "But last Sunday morning—Palm Sunday—I was in the rectory next door, where I live, and I heard a lot of commotion, and when I went outside my nose told me there was a fire. The building just behind us was burning. People had rushed out into the street in whatever they had on. The women were without coats, some of the kids were wearing pajamas. I didn't know what to do, but it was cold outside, our church was open and heated. So I brought them in—thirty or forty families in all. I tried to separate them into family groups and keep the groups apart from one another. Some I led up to the balcony, and some to the classrooms on the third floor. I called our members, and they began to arrive immediately, with clothes and food. We took precautions, but these people needed care right then. We fed and clothed them, and later in the day most of them could go back into their building. That taught me something. As Paul says in Second Corinthians, 'When I am weak, then I am strong.' I was feeling thwarted and helpless, but if I'd been making hospital visits that morning I would not have been here to help those people."

St. Augustine-Our Lady of Victory does its feast-day celebrations up big. On Easter, the African-American women wear elaborate hats, the Garifuna dress in their culture's signature yellow and black, and some of the Nigerians who are chiefs put on their traditional robes. The boys wear suits, and the girls are brightly beribboned. This year, Father Stewart will do the Easter service in the church by himself online, via his phone, which he sets on a tripod that he uses to hold his bicycle. "It's strange when I'm preaching and just looking at my phone, but I know my words are going out to our members, and I know they're with me," he said. "This is a very poor part of the Bronx. The people are resilient and resourceful and hopeful, and they have everything to teach us. I want to always walk with them."

Some of the members don't have computers or iPhones, but they do have flip phones. Maria Peguero, the church's pastoral associate, who was born in the Dominican Republic, leads small-group prayer meetings every day. "I don't know what to do, so I ask Father Stewart, and he says, 'Pray more,'" she said. "I pray so hard, every day. I pray by myself, and with my husband. I call four or five members at one time, and we pray on a conference call. So many people right now are living in suffering and darkness, but that is not the last word, because God is in charge with us, and he will bring us something better."

—*Ian Frazier*

SKETCHPAD BY EDWARD STEED
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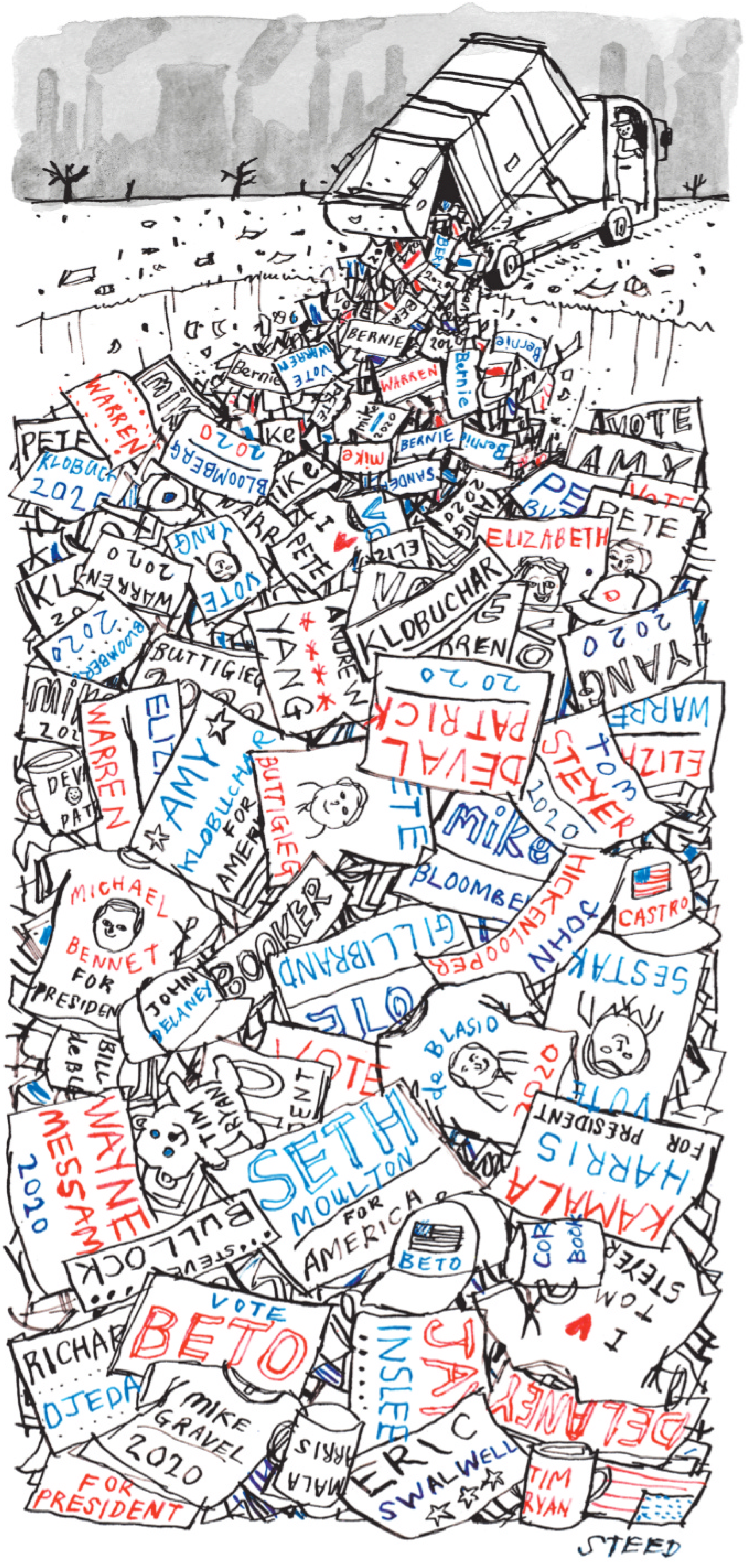
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ERIC SWALWELL
TIM RYAN
STEED

POSTSCRIPT

JUAN SANABRIA

The life and death of one of New York City's first coronavirus victims.

BY JONATHAN BLITZER

Sanabria celebrating his fiftieth birthday, in August, 2017.

COURTESY WALKIRIS CRUZ-PEREZ

At 860 Grand Concourse, a residential apartment building in the Bronx, the doorman's post is just inside the front door, on a landing between two flights of stairs. One of them leads up to the offices of a dentist and a lawyer, who, along with several physicians, rent commercial space. The other goes down past two pairs of gold-painted columns and into the main lobby, where an elevator services seven floors with a hundred and eleven apartments. Tuesday through Saturday, between eight in the morning and five in the evening, tenants going down to or coming up from the lobby could expect a greeting from a trim, punctilious man with close-cropped hair. He wore a navy-blue uniform that hung loosely off his narrow shoulders. His name was Juan Sanabria.

There was an art to Sanabria's salutations. Dana Frishkorn, who's lived in the building for three and a half years, appreciated that he called her by her first name when she entered, and never failed to tell her "Take care" when she left. Yet somehow Sanabria knew that Anthony Tucker, who has spent five years in the building, preferred to be called by his last name. "Hey, Tuck," Sanabria would say, extending his hand for a fist bump. When Tony Chen, who runs a boutique tour company and lives on the seventh floor, limped into the building one morning, addled by plantar fasciitis, Sanabria showed him a foot stretch that helped. On another day, when a tenant showed up at the front door with a large couch to take up to his apartment, even though the building's rules mandated the use of a side door, Sanabria stood watch to make sure a meddlesome neighbor didn't wander over.

"With Juan, you always got the sense that he was more knowledgeable than he let on," Georgeen Comerford, who has lived in the building for nearly fifty years, told me. A photography professor at CUNY, she described Sanabria as a "mensch who appreciated the ironies." He would call her *mámi*, and wink, when she passed through the lobby. It wasn't just that you were glad to see him, she said. "If you didn't see him, you wanted to know where he was. When he wasn't around, you felt it."

Uncharacteristically, Sanabria wasn't around the last week of February. His eighty-two-year-old mother, with whom he shared an apartment on Ogden Avenue, was suffering from emphysema; he had taken her to a nearby hospital. When word spread in the building that Sanabria's mother was ill, no one was surprised to learn that he was by her side. "It was who he was," Jimmy Montalvo, one of the other doormen, told me. Montalvo and Sanabria were neighbors—Montalvo got his job at the building through Sanabria, three years ago—and frequently had breakfast together at their corner bodega; Sanabria was always bringing food back for his mother, Montalvo said. "He took good care of her." Even when Sanabria was away from 860 Grand Concourse, during a break or on his days off, he gave the impression that he was never far. James Tirado, the youngest and newest doorman on staff, used to get calls and texts from Sanabria, checking up on him. "How's the day going?" Sanabria would ask. "Is everything going O.K. for you?"

By the time his mother's health had improved, and Sanabria returned to work, on March 3rd, he was beginning to feel ill himself. There were still very few publicly known COVID-19 cases in New York City, and his symptoms—dizziness and fatigue—were not yet widely associated with the disease. He wasn't coughing, and he didn't have a fever. He went home anyway, to rest for a few days. On Monday, March 9th, his day off, he returned to 860 Grand Concourse, to consult with a doctor on the first floor—his "doctor friend," he called him. He was feeling worse, and had developed a cough. Tirado noticed him wheezing as he passed the doorman's post.

While he waited for the doctor, Sanabria called one of his stepdaughters, Walkiris Cruz-Perez, a nurse at Columbia-Presbyterian. She was in the Dominican Republic at the time, getting dental work done, but she was concerned enough to call him an ambulance. "He would never call one for himself," she said. "But I made him promise me one thing. I said to him, 'Go to Columbia. Go to *my* hospital. Don't go to Lincoln.'" She was referring to the Bronx hospital where Sanabria was born, and which he held in almost superstitiously high esteem. Lincoln was where he had taken his mother a week earlier, and where one of his best friends had died, a few years before. He'd even considered applying for a part-time job there as a security guard.

It took about twenty minutes for the ambulance to arrive and for the orderlies to load him into the back. Not yet feverish, he insisted—in his usual, stoic way—that he was feeling just fine. What was most telling, though, was the fact that he did not object to being taken to the hospital; almost compulsively protective of others, he was finally ceding control to someone else, which struck Walkiris as worrisome. She talked him through the situation on FaceTime, as Tirado watched from the door. It would be the last time anyone from the building saw Sanabria.

In the days after Sanabria's death, his former tenants and co-workers staggered between shock and grief. Contributing to the over-all sense of loss was their collective realization that, while they each felt close to him, most of them actually knew little about him. Montalvo, for instance, was vaguely aware that Sanabria had served in the military, yet he never learned any of the details. One tenant in the building, a thirty-eight-year-old nurse and Navy reservist named Frankie Hamilton, knew about Sanabria's time in the Navy because they swapped stories about training at a facility near Throgs Neck, in the Bronx. But he didn't know anything about Sanabria's family. Another tenant told me, "I kept hearing that he had a daughter who was a nurse, but also that his daughter was a cop. Which was it?"

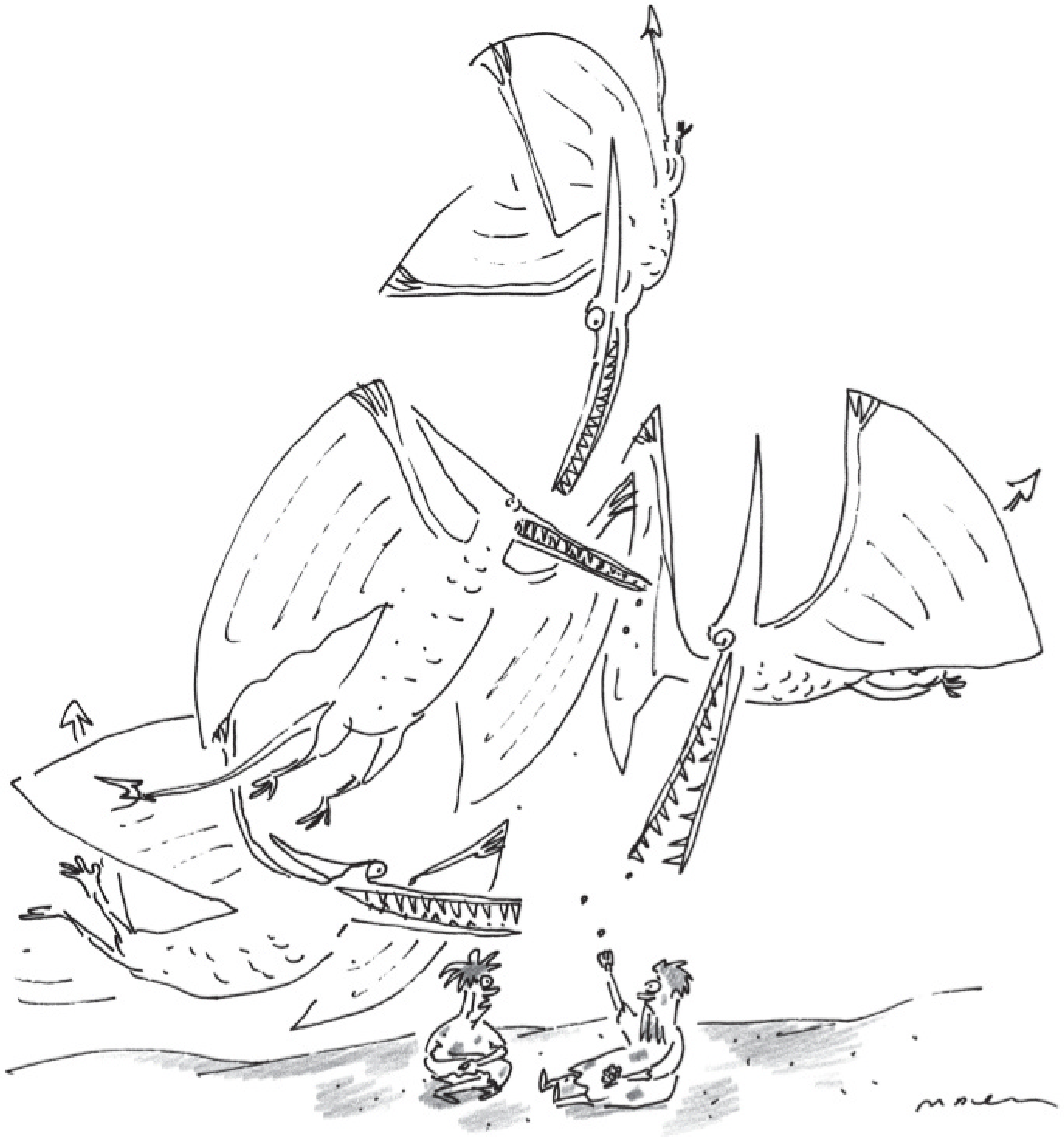
He had two stepdaughters, actually—a nurse *and* an N.Y.P.D. officer. He spoke about each of them constantly, with an unabashed and even grandiloquent sense of pride. Yet he shared stories about them in different ways to different people. Julia Donahue-Wait, a registered nurse herself, knew all about Walkiris's career. But she would be at work during the day, when Sanabria's other stepdaughter, Waleska, often dropped in to meet him for lunch. Waleska's precinct, the Forty-fourth, includes the stretch of Grand Concourse where Sanabria worked. Several times a week, they went to a deli down the street and ate in his break room at the building. "When I didn't have time, we would stand at the front door and talk about my son," Waleska told me. Their conversations revolved around three things, she said: her child, her mother, and her work. "He loved that I was a cop. He was always telling me about things that would happen around the neighborhood."

Sanabria, the son of Puerto Rican parents, grew up near the old Yankee Stadium, in the Bronx. After high school, he joined the Navy, where he served for the next twenty years. Travelling was an obsession of his—in the service, he spent time in the Philippines and the Bahamas—but he also loved structure and a sense of routine. "I used to say to him, 'Juan, you're just weird!'" Mimi Roman, his oldest friend, told me. (The two of them were born on the same day: August 13, 1967.) "He had to have everything in order. He'd always have his way of doing things." After he was given a diagnosis of celiac disease, a digestive disorder that rendered him allergic to gluten, he adjusted his diet and stuck to it. "It was always everything in moderation," Roman said.

In his mid-thirties, Sanabria retired from the military and returned home, finding a job as a janitor at a local elementary school. The youngest of four children, he was fanatically devoted to his parents; he worked overtime so that they'd have money to take vacations. In 2003, looking for an additional source of income, he began working part time at 860 Grand Concourse, covering odd shifts and filling in for the other doormen when they were sick or on vacation. He was perfectly suited for a job that rewarded dependability and charm. Unflaggingly serious about work, he also had a mischievous side, playing practical jokes and making people laugh. "He had goals in life," Roman said. "He wanted to achieve things. He didn't want to ever be stuck. He knew all about his surroundings. He was up on things. I used to call him 'the news' because he always knew what was going on."

He met Raquel Ramos, his partner of eleven years, at a dominoes game across the street from his apartment. She was Dominican, and nine years his senior; she had two daughters, two sons, and three grandchildren, whom Sanabria immediately treated like family. I asked Waleska if it took time for her, her sister, and their children to respond in kind. "Not at all," she said. "He was a great guy, and we saw how much he loved our mother." When Waleska got married, he was there, presiding just as any father would, and when, in 2014, she got a divorce, he helped her find and pay for a lawyer. "He was the only one who helped me with that," she said. "He was the type of man I'd want my son to become. The type of person I would love for my nieces to marry."

He also grew close to Walkiris's two daughters, who used to stay with their grandmother while Walkiris was at nursing school and, later, at the hospital. Sanabria was almost always there. After leaving 860 Grand Concourse, he'd stop off at his apartment to give his mother dinner, then travel to Washington Heights to be with the rest of his family. Walkiris's younger daughter, Emeli, who's now thirteen, came to expect a text message from him every day at three-thirty, just as she



“Would you please stop feeding the pterodactyls?”

was leaving school, to make sure she was coming over for dinner. “His life was my mom, his mom, his grandchildren, and his job,” Walkiris told me.

A few hours after calling the ambulance for Sanabria, Walkiris checked in with him on FaceTime. He was in a hospital bed, but she didn’t recognize the walls and surroundings behind him. “Juan, I’m going to kick your ass!” she said. It wasn’t that she had any particular reason to distrust the care he would receive at Lincoln Hospital, as opposed to Columbia-Presbyterian; she just wanted him to be at the facility she knew, the place in which she had the greatest faith. “I was born here,” he replied. “Anyway, I just have a cough. You’re making too much of this.” She told him, “Your face is red. You clearly have a fever. This is serious.”

A doctor in a hazmat suit entered the room and asked for Sanabria’s phone so he could speak to Walkiris outside. The test results hadn’t come back yet, he told her, but Sanabria’s symptoms, including the images of his lungs taken from a CT scan, matched the profile of COVID-19, based on documented cases out of Wuhan, in China. Walkiris flew home that afternoon, and went straight to the hospital. When she arrived, with her suitcases in tow, Sanabria was in quarantine.

Six years ago, Sanabria had asked Walkiris to be his health-care proxy. He was forty-six at the time, and in good health. She never understood why he raised the issue with her. But he insisted—“I know you’ll take good care of me,” he said—and she agreed. As a result, she was legally allowed to enter his room at Lincoln Hospital, though doing so would have been extremely dangerous under the circumstances. That Monday night, she spoke to him from outside his door, again on FaceTime, and they agreed that she would go home and return in the morning. By then, he had full-fledged pneumonia, and was getting oxygen through a tube inserted in his nose. His face had flushed to a deep red.

At eight o’clock the next morning, the doctor called Walkiris and asked her to help persuade Sanabria to be intubated. He’d deteriorated overnight, and now needed to be on a respirator. “Am I going to die?” Sanabria asked Walkiris. “No, *pápi*,” she told him. “They’re going to put you to sleep for a little while, so you can relax your lungs. You’re breathing too fast.” He seemed dazed. “I don’t feel sick,” he said calmly. “Will you be here when I wake up?”

“I’ll see you on the other side,” she replied. “Let them do this.” As the nurses prepared to intubate him, he bragged about how his daughter was a nurse. Just before he went under, he sent Walkiris one last selfie.

By March 10th, Mayor Bill de Blasio had announced thirty-six confirmed COVID-19 cases in New York City. It isn’t clear whether Sanabria was counted among them. Most likely, he wasn’t yet. It would be another four days before the first deaths in the city were made public. The patients were elderly—one was eighty-two, another seventy-nine—and they had underlying medical conditions. It seemed inconceivable that Sanabria would suffer a similar fate.

Walkiris returned to the hospital around six that evening. The thought of Sanabria lying alone in the intensive-care unit had grown intolerable, and she was determined to see him, despite the risk of getting infected herself. “I figured I’d already been in contact with the virus anyway,” she said. “I may as well be exposed to family.” She approached his room, but a doctor, who had introduced herself as Dr. K., intercepted her. Walkiris was crying, and pleaded to be allowed inside. Dr. K. held her firmly by the arms, and told her to close her eyes. “I want you to visualize a conversation I’m going to have right now with your father,” the doctor told her. “Imagine I’m walking into his room as his doctor, and asking him if he would feel comfortable with you coming in to see him.

I'm telling him about the risks to you and your family if you went in there. What would he say? Would he want you to say goodbye to his spirit in there, or out here?" Walkiris told me later that, in that moment, the doctor may have saved her life.

The reality fully set in on Thursday, March 12th, when a colleague invited her to join a private Facebook group of doctors and nurses at Columbia-Presbyterian. One of the doctors had shared a chart detailing the progression of fatal COVID-19 cases. Patients who eventually died from the disease entered the emergency room with normal heart function, then suffered total respiratory failure. Under typical circumstances, such a failure would coincide with sepsis or shock, but that wasn't the case for many with COVID-19. These patients might appear to stabilize and even to improve. Yet within hours their condition would deteriorate once more, this time irreparably, and their heart function would swiftly decline. "It was his presentation exactly," Walkiris said. "I can't even explain it to you. That's when I really knew. All I could do was cry."

The next day, Juan's blood pressure dropped precipitately. Walkiris's sister and mother tried to visit him in the hospital, too, but were turned away. They told Walkiris to pray. "I kept telling them, 'Look at this chart. He doesn't even have a few days,'" Walkiris said. "My family didn't want to hear it." He never regained consciousness after being intubated; by the time he died, on March 17th, no one had been able to say goodbye.

The management company at 860 Grand Concourse sent a notice to the building's residents later that night. "We have been informed that Juan Sanabria, daytime Doorman has passed away this morning," it said. "His family informed Management that he tested Positive for Coronavirus." That was the only reference to him and his family that appeared in the notice; the rest of it listed a new battery of precautions that the building would be implementing—increased frequency of cleaning and daily disinfecting—along with recommendations from the New York City Health Department for how to avoid spreading or contracting the virus. Many of the residents were put off by the impersonal tone, one of them, a journalist named Alice Speri, told me. "I have been thinking about Juan non-stop since he passed," Speri said. "He was such a regular, happy part of our daily lives. I know that every time I walk through the building's door I won't be able to not think about him."

Georgeen Comerford was at home when she received the notice. A few days earlier, Jimmy Montalvo had told her that Sanabria was sick. "I thought immediately about the virus," she told me. One morning, while Sanabria was in the hospital, she went downstairs to ask James Tirado, who was on duty, if he knew more about the situation. "I can't even talk about it," he had told her, choking back tears. She began to brace herself for the worst—"It was like you were letting air out of the balloon," she said—but she was still unprepared for the announcement of his death. "It was a punch in the stomach," she said.

Early the next day, Comerford listened to the news on the radio. By then, CUNY had moved classes online. Isolated in her apartment, she found herself trying to piece together how Sanabria fit into the broader account of what was developing in the city. He'd been among the first fatalities. "Was he the eleventh person who died? I was trying to figure out if he was the tenth or the eleventh," Comerford told me. "That made this whole thing very real. Before, the deaths were just statistics. Knowing that one of them was Juan, it gave the thing a face."

At 860 Grand Concourse, everyone's anguish is now tinged with fear. A week after Sanabria died, there was another confirmed case of COVID-19 in the building. Montalvo and Tirado were growing uncomfortable working the door, and were trying to scale back their hours without management docking their pay. When we last spoke, at the end of March, Montalvo was in touch with a union representative to figure out whether staying home would count against his sick days. There was money but also safety to consider, he told me. They'd been exposed to Sanabria themselves, and yet, in some ways, that was the least of it. "We have a friend, not just our co-worker, who died, too," he told me.

Meanwhile, because the cause of death was COVID-19, none of the mortuaries that Walkiris and her family called were willing to pick up Sanabria's body; his corpse remained in the hospital morgue for nine days before one service finally agreed to help. A funeral was out of the question. All of Sanabria's family members spent fourteen days in quarantine. The only one of them to show any symptoms was his mother, who had stomach pain and a low-grade fever. She ultimately tested positive for COVID-19, but her symptoms remained mild; she's since recovered. Waleska went back to work on Sunday, March 29th. She had been nervous about returning to her beat—not because of the coronavirus or anything specific about the job. She would have to patrol past 860 Grand Concourse. "And that is where I'll see him," she said.

Sanabria's cell phone, which the hospital gave to Walkiris, was full of voice memos and missed calls. Listening to them, Walkiris heard friends of his, most of whom she'd never met, calling him Juanito and Juancho. "Everyone had a distinctive thing," she said. She realized that he'd been as reliable and routine-oriented with his friends as he'd always been with his family; people were calling because he used to check up on them regularly, and, when they hadn't heard from him, they worried that something was wrong. Eventually, Walkiris signed on to his Facebook account to post the news. "Juan Sanabria passed away due to coronavirus," she wrote. "My dad was a loving man who was a respected son, father, and grandfather. Please in light of what is going on in the world please tell your loved ones how much you love them. Once the city allows us to have a service in his name I will make sure to let everyone know." ♦

DEPT. OF FINANCE

THE PRICE OF A PANDEMIC

Pain and profit on Wall Street.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

The investor who calls himself the Australian headed out for a walk on his farm in the Alps of New South Wales, three hundred miles south of Sydney. This was a morning in late March. He'd been holed up there for a month with his wife and three kids, plus two portable oxygen units and a store of hydroxychloroquine. "But my intention is not to get it," he said, of COVID-19. "I don't plan to see anyone until October." He was talking on a cell phone. You could hear the caw of crows in the background, and the luffing of the wind. "I only see four other people in the valley. If I need to kill them, I will." One assumed, from the way he laughed, that this was a joke.

As in epidemiology, the basis of the financial markets is numbers.

The Australian, who spoke on the condition that his name not be used, is a voluble redhead just shy of fifty. "Billions dude looks like me," he wrote, in a WhatsApp message accompanied by a pair of photos. He did indeed resemble Damian Lewis, the actor who plays a hedge-fund magnate in the Showtime series "Billions." "He stole my look." Reared in Sydney, the Australian moved to New York in 1994, when he turned twenty-two, to trade commodities at Goldman Sachs. At JPMorgan, he and a couple of his countrymen—known as the Aussie mafia—earned the firm hundreds of millions in profits during the early months of the financial crisis, in 2008. In 2015, he moved to Singapore. Proximity to China, a bearish disposition, and an interest in the history of virulent diseases led him to pay special attention to the effects that recent outbreaks had had on financial markets. SARS, H1N1, Ebola. Last October, he listened to an audiobook by the Hardcore History podcaster, Dan Carlin, called "The End Is Always Near." "So I had pandemics and plagues in my head," the Australian said. "In December, I started seeing the first articles about this wet-market thing going on in China, and then in early January there was a lot on Twitter about the shit in Wuhan." He was in Switzerland on a ski holiday with his family, and he bought all the surgical masks and gloves he could find. On the flight back to Australia, he and his wife wore some, to the bewilderment of other passengers.

He quickly put some money to work. He bought a big stake in Alpha Pro Tech, one of the few North American manufacturers of N95 surgical masks, with the expectation that when the virus made it across the Pacific the company would get government contracts to produce more. The stock was trading at about three dollars and fifty cents a share, and so, for cents on the dollar, he bought options to purchase the shares at a future date for ten dollars: he was betting that it would go up much more than that. By the end of February, the stock was trading at twenty-five dollars a share. He shorted oil and, as a proxy for oil, the Canadian dollar. (That is, he bet against both.) Finally, he shorted U.S. equities.

"You don't know anyone who has made as much money out of this as I have," he said over the phone. No argument here. He wouldn't specify an amount, but reckoned that he was up almost two thousand per cent on the year.

Emboldened by vindication, the Australian, walking through the countryside, laid out his prognosis for the United States and the world. America needed to "rip off the Band-Aid," he said. The federal government should close the borders, shut off all international commerce, declare martial law, deploy the military to build field hospitals and isolation wards, and arrest or even fire on anyone who didn't abide by a stay-in-place protocol. ("In 1918, in San Francisco, a cop shot someone in broad daylight for being outside without a face mask, and the cop

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

was celebrated for it!") Or perhaps the government should reward each citizen who strictly observed the quarantine with fifty thousand dollars. "The virus would burn out after four weeks," he said. The U.S. had all the food and water and fuel it would need to survive months, if not years, of total isolation from the world. "If you don't trade with China, they're screwed," he said. "You'd win this war. Let the rest of the world burn." The problem, he said, was that, perhaps more now than ever, Americans lack what he called "social cohesion," and thus the collective will, to commit to such a path. "Plus, you have guns. Lots of guns. And all the base materials for your drugs, like ninety-seven per cent, come from China." He predicted that any less stringent measures—the slow removal of the Band-Aid that we are experiencing now—would result in social unrest bordering on civil war, and the decimation of our medical ranks. "So suddenly everyone who's seen 'House' would be a doctor," he said. Politically, the Australian considered himself well right of center, yet he thought it ridiculous that the United States doesn't have nationalized health care. He predicted the cancellation of the Presidential election, or Donald Trump's resignation, or the creation of an emergency leadership council, to which, throughout the conversation, he nominated Generals Mattis and Petraeus, Bill Gates, and Gary Cohn, for whom the Australian had worked at Goldman Sachs. "You could have either four weeks of pain and a future boom or years of this rolling bullshit and a depression. But people are just selfish. They're not thinking. They're morons."

It was one such moron, an old friend of mine, who had introduced me to the Australian. They'd overlapped at Goldman Sachs. I'd been eavesdropping for a week on the friend's WhatsApp conversation with dozens of his acquaintances and colleagues (he called them the Fokkers, for an acronym involving his name), all of them men, most of them expensively educated financial professionals, some of them very rich, a few with connections in high places. The general disposition of the participants, with exceptions, was the opposite of the Australian's. Between memes, they expressed the belief, with a conviction that occasionally tipped into stridency or mockery, that the media, the modellers, and the markets were overreacting to the threat of the coronavirus—that it was little more than another flu, and that effectively shutting down the economy to prevent, or at least slow, the spread of the virus would turn out to be far more harmful, in the long run, than the virus itself. "The biggest own goal in memory," one Fokker wrote.

"Suicide due to innumeracy," another noted.

They constituted a sample of the-cure-is-worse-than-the-disease segment of the population, and, on the day of my conversation with the Australian, President Trump appeared to be steering hard their way. Defying the dire prognostications and pleadings of the medical establishment, Trump threw out there that businesses would soon reopen and that economic activity might kick in again by Easter. (Oh, well.) In the next few days, it was perhaps this prospect, as well as the unprecedentedly large two-trillion-dollar stimulus package passed in the Senate, that caused the stock market to rally, after one of the most precipitate collapses in its history. (As a general rule, despite the assertions of the financial media, it is difficult to say with any certainty which relevant facts or sentiments may make the market indices go up or down on any given day.) On March 26th, when the Labor Department reported that a record 3.3 million Americans had filed jobless claims the previous week—as if every man, woman, and child in Philadelphia and Phoenix suddenly joined the breadline—both the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S. & P. 500 shot up more than six per cent. The crosswinds were fierce.

Meanwhile, New York's health-care system was sinking into chaos, as COVID-19 cases swamped hospitals. That day, there were more 911 calls than there had been on September 11, 2001. Some Fokkers, however, felt that it was important not to get swept up in apocalyptic tales or media reports, or to fall for the Chicken Littles. They mocked Jim Cramer, the host of the market program "Mad Money," on CNBC, for predicting a great depression and wondering if anyone would ever board an airplane again. Anecdotes, hyperbole: the talking chuckleheads sowing and selling fear.

As in epidemiology, the basis of the financial markets, and of arguments about them, is numbers—data and their deployments. Reliable data about COVID-19 have been scarce, mainly because, in the shameful absence of widespread testing, no one knows how many people have or have had the virus, which would determine the rate of infection and, most crucially, the fatality rate. The numerator (how many have died) is known, more or less, but it's the denominator (how many have caught it) that has been the object of such speculation. If I had a roll of toilet paper for every finance guy's analysis of the death rate I've been asked to read, I'd have toilet paper. Most of these calculations, it seems, are arguments for why the rate is likely to be much, much lower than the medical experts have concluded. The less lethal it is, the better the comparison to the flu, and therefore the easier it is to chide everyone for getting so worked up over it. As Lawrence White, a professor of economics at George Mason University, tweeted, "Almost everyone talking about the #coronavirus is displaying strong confirmation bias. Which only goes to prove what I've always said."

Still, it's hard for a coldhearted capitalist to know just how cold the heart must go. Public-health professionals make a cost-benefit calculation, too, with different weightings. What's the trade-off? How many deaths are tolerable? Zero? Tens of thousands, as with the flu? Or whatever number it is that will keep us from slipping into a global depression? The public-health hazards of deepening unemployment and poverty—mental illness, suicide, addiction, malnutrition—are uncounted.

Financial people love to come at you with numbers, to cluck over the innumeracy of the populace and the press, to cite the tyranny of the anecdote and the superior risk-assessment calculus of the guy who has an understanding of stochastic volatility and some skin in the game—even when that skin is other people's. But while risk and price are intertwined, value and values are something else entirely. It can be hard to find the right math for those.

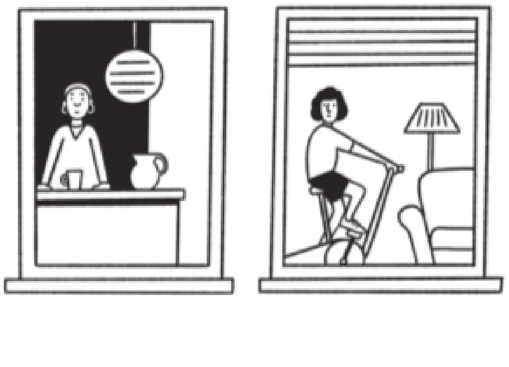
In the months following the first tidings of COVID-19 from China, Trump played down its potential impact—attempting to jawbone a virus, or at least the perception of it. But a virus, unlike a President, doesn't care how it's perceived. It gets penetration, whether you believe in it or not. By the time, later in March, that he acknowledged the scale of the pandemic (and sought to convince those who hadn't been paying attention that he'd been paying attention all along, except to the extent that he'd been distracted), it had long been abundantly clear that he cared more about the economic damage—even if it was only in relation to his reëlection prospects, or to the fate of his hotel and golf-resort businesses—than about any particular threshold regarding loss of life or the greater good. Others, perhaps on his behalf, have tried to expand his position. For a few days, the message, reinforced by the likes of Glenn Beck ("I'd rather die than kill the country") and Dan Patrick, the soon-to-be-seventy lieutenant governor of Texas ("If that's the exchange, I'm all in"), was that we might have to sacrifice our elders for the sake of the economy. The politics of it were perverse. Many of the same people who had cited "death panels" in the fight against Obamacare were now essentially arguing the opposite. One man's cost controls are another man's eugenics.

For Trump, the economy is basically the stock market. He's obsessed with it, much the way he fixates on television ratings. The stock market is, among other things, a great mood indicator. But it isn't the economy—not even close. As we're now discovering, to more horror than surprise, the cessation of commercial activity—travel, tourism, entertainment, restaurants, sports, construction, conferences, or really any transactions, in significant volume, be they in lawyering, accounting, book sales, or sparkplugs—means no revenue, no ability to make payroll or rent, mass layoffs, steep declines in both supply and demand, and reverberations, up and down the food chain, of defaults on debt. That's the economy.

This brutal shock is attacking a body that was already vulnerable. In the event of a global depression, a postmortem might identify COVID-19 as the cause of death, but, as with so many of the virus's victims, the economy had a preëxisting condition—debt, instead of pulmonary disease. Corporate debt, high-yield debt, distressed debt, student debt, consumer debt, mortgage debt, sovereign debt. "It's as if the virus is almost beside the point," a trader I know told me. "This was all set up to happen."

The trader was one of those guys who had been muttering about a financial collapse for a decade. The 2008 bailout, with the politically motivated and, at best, capricious sorting of winners and losers, rankled, as did the ongoing collusion among the big banks, the Federal Reserve, and politicians of both parties. He'd heard that the "smart money," like the giant asset-management firms Blackstone and the Carlyle Group, was now telling companies to draw down their bank lines, and borrow as much as they could, in case the lenders went out of business or found ways to say no. Sure enough, by March's end, corporations had reportedly tapped a record two hundred and eight billion dollars from their revolving-credit lines—a "revolver frenzy," as the financial blog Zero Hedge put it, in publishing a list of the companies "that managed to get their money in time." Corporate America had hit up the pawnshop, en masse. In a world where we talk, suddenly, of trillions, two hundred billion may not seem like a lot, but it is: in 2007, the subprime-mortgage lender Countrywide Financial, in drawing down "just" $11.5 billion, helped bring the system to its knees.

It is hard to navigate out of the debt trap. Creditors can forgive debtors, but that process, especially at this level, would be almost impossibly laborious and fraught. Meanwhile, defaults flood the market with collateral, be it buildings, stocks, or aircraft. The price of that collateral collapses—haircuts for baldheads—leading to more defaults. The market in distressed debt has already ballooned to about a trillion dollars.



As April arrived, businesses, large and small, decided not to pay rent, either because they didn't have the cash on hand or because, with a recession looming, they wanted to preserve what cash they had. Furloughed or fired employees, meanwhile, faced similar decisions, as landlords sent threatening reminders. Would property owners, without their monthly nut, be able to finance their own debts? And what of the banks, with all the bad paper? In the last week of March, an additional 6.6 million Americans filed jobless claims, doubling the previous week's record. In New York State, where nearly half a million new claims had been filed in two weeks, the unemployment-insurance trust began to teeter toward insolvency. Come summer, there would be no money left to pay unemployment benefits.

As the stock markets tanked, and the bond markets freaked out, the klaxons of doom broke the spell of what had been a kind of perpetually rattled complacency. For three years, Trump's fits and provocations—and even his protectionist policies toward traditional trading partners—had failed to knock the markets off course for any prolonged stretch. The markets, the reasoning went, liked Trump—or at least his tide of deregulation, business-friendly tax policies, and the regimen (which, of course, predated his Presidency) of low interest rates and easy money.

On March 20th, Goldman Sachs spooked the world, by predicting a twenty-four-per-cent decline in G.D.P. in the second quarter, a falloff in activity that seemed at once both unthinkable and inevitable. Subsequent predictions grew even more dismal. The service sector—the economy's real mainstay—would be hit the hardest, and the implications for people's jobs, and their ability to pay for things, were dire. In an e-mail exchange among some of my old schoolmates—an orthopedic surgeon forced to all but shut down his practice because of the interruption of elective surgeries, a commercial-real-estate guy firing hundreds of employees—a futures trader wrote, "Sell everything that isn't nailed down." Earlier in the week, notes from a Goldman call, with talk of terrible numbers, had leaked out onto the Street. A couple of the Fokkers, on the basis of no evidence except decades of experience, suspected Goldman of sowing fear in order to profit. They certainly thought that was what Bill Ackman, the hedge-fund billionaire, had done: he went on CNBC and said, "Hell is coming." He predicted that the nation would enter a depression if the White House didn't take drastic measures. Hotel chains would go out of business; Hilton's stock would go to zero. The Fokkers, watching from their home trading stations, mocked him:

"Now Ackman is in tears."

"He sounds unhinged."

"Irresponsible. . . . Wanker."

"In an industry of cocks, he's one of the great ones."

Like the Australian, Ackman advocated a shutdown of the global economy. And, like the Australian, he had profited from his pessimism. A week after his appearance on CNBC, his firm, Pershing Square Capital Management, announced that it had netted $2.6 billion (on an investment of just twenty-seven million dollars) on bearish credit bets, which paid off if certain bundles of loans declined in value. This news enraged the Fokkers; they felt that he'd been scaring people, for money. (They were more comfortable with those who would reassure people, for money.) But, by then, Ackman told me, he'd plowed most of his proceeds back into the stock market. "Our hedge had already paid off prior to my going on CNBC," he said.

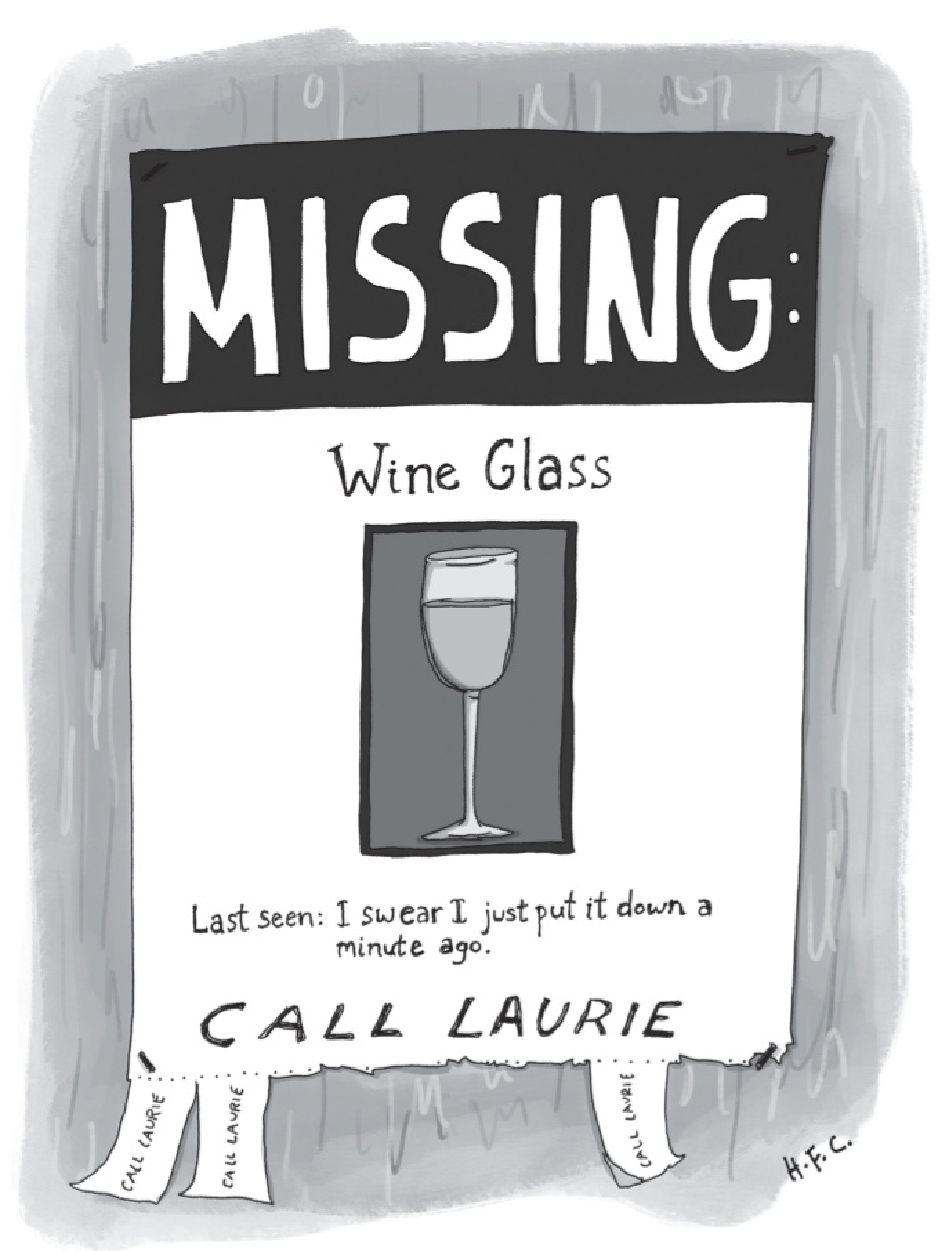
Since last year, I've been receiving daily mass e-mails from a retired hedge-fund manager named Whitney Tilson. We'd met walking our dogs in the Park, back when talking to strangers was a thing. We chatted about mountain climbing and an attempt he'd made to become a contestant on "Survivor." He added me to his list. Most of his e-mails recounted his exploits and his travels as an outdoor enthusiast—fitness advice and selfies of him climbing and hiking and skiing and running triathlons and doing Tough Mudders. Advertisements for his investment newsletter began sprouting up on some of my favorite Web sites.

Tilson is a close friend of Ackman's, from their days as undergraduates at Harvard, in the late eighties, when they sold ads for the "Let's Go" travel guides. On March 27th, Tilson declared in his newsletter that Ackman had "just made the greatest trade of all time." He was a little envious. "Was it really so hard to see on February 19, only 37 days ago, when the S&P hit an all-time high and credit spreads were close to all-time lows, that the coronavirus might be a big problem?" he wondered.

Yet, on March 9th, when it was even less hard to see that the coronavirus might be a problem, the subject line of Tilson's daily e-mail had read, "I think the current panic over the coronavirus is one of the most irrational things I've ever seen." He wrote, "Many times throughout my career, when such irrationality has manifested itself in financial markets, leading to big sell-offs, I've taken advantage—and made tens of millions of dollars for my investors." He noted that he was writing a book called "All I Want to Know Is Where I'm Going to Die: The Five Calamities That Can Destroy Your Life and How to Avoid Them." A pandemic was not one of the five.

Tilson wrote that, except for the elderly with additional health problems, "I can find no evidence that the risk of serious illness or death from the coronavirus for the overwhelming majority of Americans is anything but infinitesimal—like *one in million.*" He went on, "Therefore, unless new, contradictory evidence emerges, I think that the vast majority of Americans can safely go about their lives as usual. That's exactly what my family and I are doing. I took three flights last week to Tampa, Chicago, and Jackson, WY. Susan and Katharine flew to London last Thursday and returned yesterday evening. They reported that everything there was completely normal. (Gotta love the stoic Brits—keep calm and carry on!) Emily flew from Newark to join me in Jackson today. I rode a dozen times on a gondola today with strangers (as Emily and I will be doing every day this week)."

Putting aside the fact that luxury ski



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resorts in Europe and North America were already emerging as super-spreaders ("Après-ski is a virus spewer," an Austrian epidemiologist said of Ischgl, formerly the Ibiza of the Alps and now its Wuhan), Tilson's apparent disregard for the commonweal touched a nerve with his readers, who flooded him with angry replies. "I think you are totally wrong and causing harm," Ackman told him. "This makes you look incredibly ignorant." Like Mayor Bill de Blasio, who, slow on the draw, had urged New Yorkers to "go about your lives," as the corona clouds massed, before grudgingly coming around, Tilson began to revise his opinions, as well as his tone. Soon he was volunteering to help build a field hospital in Central Park's East Meadow, across the street from Mount Sinai Hospital and his apartment building. "I'm working so hard that I've *lost* five pounds (going from 169 to 163)," he wrote, on April 2nd, proving that innumeracy is contagious. "Can you believe we all used to pay for workout classes?"

The Fokkers found it hard to let go of the conviction that the crisis was overblown, and that the shutdown could do more harm than good. One of the more clamorous champions of this opinion went quiet for a while, as he battled the virus at home, in some terror over his mounting inability to breathe. Another had a cousin on a re-breather, a firefighter who'd worked the pile at Ground Zero. And yet within a week both of them were sharing a wish that there were a way to short the price of ventilators in June or September, in the belief that we wouldn't need nearly as many as the governors of the most beleaguered states were claiming. Someone floated the idea of a job-losses-per-death calculation. Hope was expressed: in the levelling off of death rates in Italy; in the F.D.A.'s emergency approval of the experimental treatment of hydroxychloroquine; in the antibody tests coming out of the United Kingdom, which might determine who'd had the virus, and therefore who was immune and able to rejoin the workforce. Perhaps "the manufactured hysteria," as one investor put it, was finally collapsing.

But no one doubted that, in economic terms, the situation was grave almost beyond imagining. A fund manager wrote, "Virus is like a huge sink hole in global economy. No one (not even anyone on this chat!) knows how big/deep it is. And every day world in lockdown it gets bigger and deeper. Policy makers also have no clue, but they have to do something, so they have started shovelling fiscal and monetary 'dirt' into hole. If hole bigger than dirt, we get deflation and you do the obvious. If dirt bigger than hole, you get . . . inflation. And if by complete dumb luck, dirt=hole, back to Goldilocks." He reckoned "hole>dirt."

Either way, it's going to require a lot of fill. Whether you favor or abhor deficits, whether you're a Keynesian, a Hayekian, or an advocate of Modern Monetary Theory, we have little choice at this point except to run up a huge deficit to fund rescue and stimulus on an unprecedented scale. This is the world we've made, or that our parents and grandparents have. There's no real constituency now for austerity.

Another fund manager on the Fokker chain was modelling this behavior, on his own balance sheet. His advice: Borrow as much as you can. Mortgage everything. With interest rates at historic lows, you could accumulate cash and have money on hand to buy distressed assets on the cheap, whether they're stocks, bonds, or real estate, and be well positioned to make money again when the world got back to work. This too shall pass, the old-timers said, as they always did. During the grimmer days of the 2008 financial crisis, most investors had hesitated as their more intrepid peers waded back in. They watched the hedge-fund manager David Tepper, who keeps a brass cast of a pair of testicles on his desk, make seven billion dollars by betting early on the recovery of the banks. No one wanted to miss it this time. At the end of March, there was a frenzy, in the debt markets, of "breathless buying," as the trader put it. Optimism ran through them like a fever. Last week, the Dow and the S. & P. surged. "They have the playbook," the hopeful ones said, of the central banks, which were rolling out every play they'd run in 2008.

I asked Mohamed El-Erian, the longtime co-chief investment officer at PIMCO, the world's biggest bond fund (he now advises Allianz, PIMCO's parent company), about the confidence of the Fokkers and the would-be Teppers. "It's idiotic," he said. "Well, I shouldn't use that word. This notion of a V, of a quick bounce back to where we were before—people don't understand the dynamics of paralysis."

He said, "This is much bigger than 2008. 2008 was a massive heart attack that happened suddenly to the financial markets. You could identify the problem and apply emergency remedies and revive the patient quickly. This is not just a financial stop. This is infection all over the body, damage to virtually every limb and organ. The body was already so fragile. Those of us who have had the privilege of studying failed states have seen this before, but never in a big country like the United States, let alone a global economy."

He went on, "In the financial crisis, we won the war but lost the peace." Instead of investing in infrastructure, education, and job retraining, we emphasized, via a central-bank policy of quantitative easing (what some people call printing money), the value of risk assets, like stocks. "We collectively fell in love with finance," he said. Apparently, we're still in love.

Last Thursday, amid news that another 6.6 million Americans had lost their jobs, the Fed announced the infusion of an additional $2.3 trillion, including hundreds of billions to purchase corporate debt, ranging from investment-grade to junk: big dirt. Stocks surged anew. The Fed was propping up risk assets again, at a scale that dwarfed the interventions of 2008, and the bankers were back, hats in hand. They get paid like geniuses, and yet, every ten years, they need bailing out.

A popular meme dusted off in recent weeks is an illustration of a few dinosaurs looking up at an asteroid blazing toward Earth, with a T. rex saying, "Oh shit! The economy!!" Silly dinosaurs. It can certainly seem ghoulish to worry about capital when people are dying in droves, but this isn't an extinction event. At a certain point, the pandemic will recede and leave behind a severe economic crisis, affecting everyone in ways and degrees that are impossible to predict. The financial markets are a bellwether, at least. Deflation or inflation? Rising rates? Negative rates? Three months? Six? Two years? Schools? Museums? Airplanes? Concerts? Nobody knows anything. The only thing we can say with certainty is that the pain will be unfairly distributed. People are betting on it. ◆

SHOUTS & MURMURS

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER

BY ALEX WATT

When this is all over, I will never turn down an invitation to a party. Not that I get many, but, hey, maybe that will change when everything is back to normal. Well, not normal. Back to different? The new normal, I guess.

When this is all over, I will never complain about having to go to work. Every day, I will get down on my knees and kiss that gray carpeting, as long as the industrial fibres do not irritate my lips too badly.

When this is all over, I will always wash my hands. With soap, too. And hot water, even though I find cold water more refreshing.

When this is all over, I will sometimes think, "You know what? Maybe it wasn't so bad. After all, falling down into a really big hole and not being able to get out for what has been at least a few weeks on account of the even bigger rock that rolled down a hill and got stuck on top of what could have been my exit will actually make a good story to tell my grandchildren someday. Provided that all of the Mountain Dew I've been drinking down here doesn't leave me sterile."

When this is all over, I will remind myself that it *was* bad, falling down into a really big hole and not being able to get out for what has been at least a few weeks on account of the even bigger rock that rolled down a hill and got stuck on top of what could have been my exit.

When this is all over, I will take a pickaxe with me everywhere I go so that I can tunnel my way out of any similarly unfortunate situations.

When this is all over, I will probably never want to eat Doritos again, but if I do I will gladly lick my fingers and enjoy the flavor of the dirt-free orange dust.

When this is all over, I will watch where I am going while walking home from 7-Eleven at 3 A.M. And I won't take any shortcuts. A different shortcut, at least.

When this is all over, I will request that AMC rerun the "Three Stooges" marathon I was stocking up for. It really is the least they can do, especially if they dug this hole. AMC is not one of my top suspects, but, with no solid leads as of yet, I am skeptical of everyone.

When this is all over, I will write the Rock a letter explaining my current situation and ask him for a shout-out or a signed head shot. The rock/Rock connection might not be that strong, but, honestly, I have been meaning to write him for a while anyway. I think he stole my idea to make a movie about the board game Jumanji.

When this is all over, I will also reach out to the band Hole and say, "You're only happy when it rains? I'm only happy when I'm not trapped in a big hole that's covered by a giant rock. . . . It's a long story." I do not expect to hear back from them, but if they do respond I hope they put me in touch with their label. Boy, have I got stories to tell. Yes, I am a musical artist, and, no, Hole does not sing that "Only Happy When It Rains" song, now that I think about it. Yeah, that was definitely Garbage. Whatever. Being down here has me feeling like garbage. So there is still a connection.

When this is all over, I will make "caught between a rock and a hard place to get out of" a phrase that people say. It could be shorthand for when you have only two options and both are bad. Like Mountain Dew or Doritos, after weeks of consuming only those two things.

When this is all over, I will need someone to catch me up on the latest trends and all the important news I missed out on. You know, which dances people are doing, what new Oreo flavor is out there, and which celebrities have gone viral. Maybe over a pitcher of beer that I sneaked into a batting cage? Sorry, sorry—let's just say that I am eager to get back on the dating scene.

When this is all over, I will hug the people I love and not let go until I have slipped into their back pockets the mixtape I will record about all of this, titled "Under da Rock," which I will release under my new rap name, Lil Hole Guy.

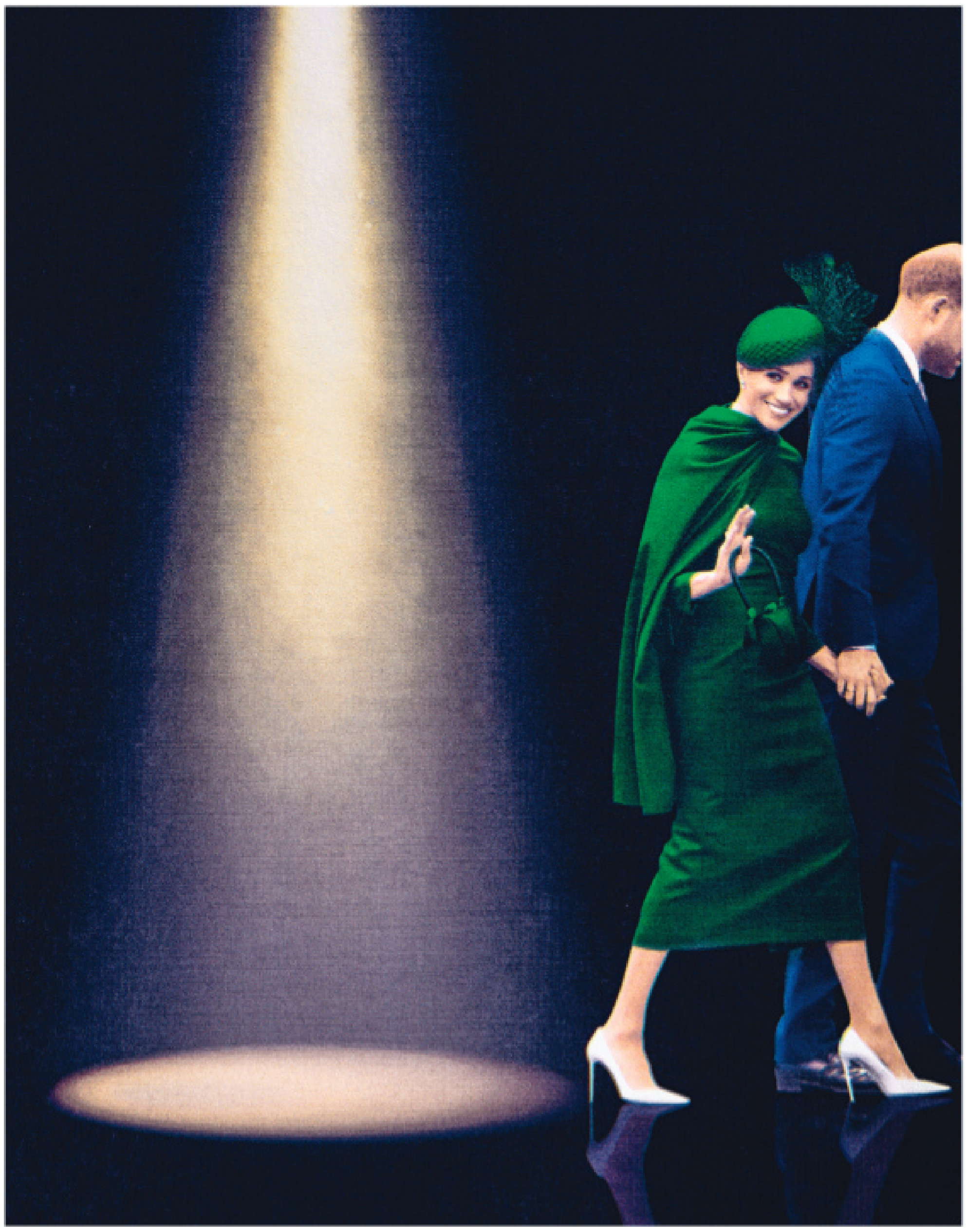
When this is all over, I will appreciate everything. Well, not big holes and giant rocks, but the little things. ◆

LETTER FROM THE U.K.

FRACTURED FAIRY TALE

The short and unhappy royal career of Harry and Meghan.

BY REBECCA MEAD



It was raining in London on the evening of March 5th, and so only a small crowd had gathered outside Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London, to watch the Duke and Duchess of Sussex arrive for an awards ceremony hosted by the Endeavour Fund, a charity that supports wounded ex-servicemen and women. As press photographers waited for the couple to dart from Land Rover to lobby, they had little hope of a great shot: rain complicates flash photography, and the Duke and Duchess might be obscured by an umbrella. Luckily, Samir Hussein, who has frequently photographed the Royal Family, had an inspiration: flashes of cameras in the crowd could create a dramatic backlighting effect, as in a studio shot, and other flashes might illuminate the faces of the Sussexes, Prince Harry and the former Meghan Markle. Hussein snapped a picture the split second that the couple, their arms linked under a single umbrella, turned toward each other and smiled. The image became instantly iconic. The pair gazed into each other's eyes with the insular complicity of newlyweds, unscathed by the rain falling around them like glittering confetti.

Although the photograph suggested nuptial bliss, it marked the conclusion of a whirlwind divorce—the abrupt separation of the Duke and Duchess from the United Kingdom and its monarchy. The event was the couple's first public appearance in the U.K. since announcing, in January, via Instagram, that they were relinquishing their roles as " 'senior' members of the Royal Family" and would henceforth be spending much of their time in North America, where they hoped to "carve out a progressive new role within this institution." In the days after the Endeavour Fund event, the couple—who, amid alarm over the spread of the coronavirus, had left their nine-month-old son, Archie, in Canada, where they had been living—carried out their final engagements before formally stepping down from their official duties, at the end of March. The Duke and Duchess will no longer use the honorific H.R.H., which stands for His—or Her—Royal Highness, though they will retain the titles. In February, in Edinburgh, the person introducing the Prince at a conference on sustainable travel asked him how he preferred to be addressed. "Just call me Harry," he said. The couple will also stop receiving income from the Sovereign Grant, the pot of public money allocated to the Queen and to family members who represent her in official roles. (The Sovereign Grant currently amounts to about a hundred million dollars.)

The couple's departure suggests that life on a pedestal is not a life worth living.

The Sussexes have declared that they plan to work, with the goal of becoming financially independent, though for now, at least, they will continue to receive funding, reportedly amounting to several million dollars, from the Duchy of Cornwall, the property of Harry's father, Prince Charles. An indication of the kind of revenue streams they may explore came in February, when Harry travelled to Miami and gave a speech at an investment summit sponsored by JPMorgan; he spoke of the lingering trauma of his very public childhood and bereavement. And last year he signed up to produce, with Oprah Winfrey, a documentary series for television, on mental-health issues; Winfrey was a guest at the Sussexes' wedding, which took place in May, 2018, in Windsor. Markle, the former star of the TV series "Suits," may resume her Hollywood career; at the end of March, the Sussexes relocated to Los Angeles. (President Donald Trump greeted their ar-

PHOTOGRAPH: NEIL MOCKFORD / GC IMAGES / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

rival by tweeting that the U.S. will not pay for their security.)

According to royal experts, the only approximate modern precursor to Megxit—the term that was inevitably coined for the Sussexes' departure—was the abdication crisis of 1936. Then, King Edward VIII stepped down from the throne in order to marry the twice-divorced Wallis Simpson, of Baltimore, Maryland; he became the Duke of Windsor and retreated into a long exile of decadent mooching, in France and elsewhere. Constitutionally speaking, there is no real parallel. A king's abdication reorders the unfolding of history: without Edward's withdrawal, the current queen, who is now in the sixty-ninth year of her reign, might never have ascended the throne. Harry's retirement from the family business does not affect the succession. It has, however, inspired a collective reckoning, for which the British public has been especially primed by three seasons of "The Crown," in which the soul-crushing nature of the institution has been amply depicted. How bad must being an H.R.H. be in order to make someone want to quit?

In the three months since the Sussexes announced their intention to step down—reportedly, before consulting the Queen, Prince Charles, or Prince William—the British people, or at least their representatives in the media, have been reeling like a spouse blindsided by a partner's sudden announcement of irreconcilable differences. The question of who, or what, was to blame for the rupture has yet to be conclusively answered. Were Harry and Meghan millennial weaklings retreating into self-care and self-pity, unwilling to withstand the scrutiny of their public life in exchange for the material luxury of their private one? Were they pampered hypocrites, lecturing others about climate change while cheerfully leaping aboard private jets belonging to celebrity friends? Were they just bored, or burned out? Were they fatally undermined by the royal establishment? Were they too ambitious for their second-fiddle roles? Or were they, despite all their privilege, victims—he the target of relentless attention since birth, and she the object of barely concealed racism?

Admittedly, these have not been Britain's most pressing concerns in recent months. Storms and floods battered the nation for much of the winter, and the instability and anxiety caused by the coronavirus have loomed much larger than the royal drama, especially in the weeks since the Sussexes' visit, during which Britain has entered lockdown, with hospitals on a war footing. Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, is among the tens of thousands who have tested positive for COVID-19, though his case turned out to be a mild one. On April 5th, the Queen, for only the fifth time in her reign, delivered a special address to the nation. Speaking from Windsor Castle, where she has been in self-isolation, she called on Britons to remain "united and resolute," and reassured her subjects that "we will meet again." That same evening, Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, was admitted to the hospital with persistent symptoms of COVID-19; he went on to spend three nights in intensive care but was, according to Downing Street, in the "early phase of his recovery" by week's end.

Dickie Arbiter, a former press secretary at Buckingham Palace, and now a familiar royal commentator, told me, of Harry and Meghan's departure, "It is sad for the Queen—at ninety-three, the last thing she wants to see is her family disappear into the sunset—and it is also a letdown for the British people. But the British people are stoic, and they get on with it. And, if that's what Harry and Meghan want, good luck to them." Yet, even as much larger crises emerged, the ongoing story of Harry and Meghan was compelling to observe, in part because the constitutional insignificance of their actions is counterbalanced by the symbolic weight of those actions.

They were saying, in effect, that life on a pedestal is not a life worth living—especially when being regularly knocked off that pedestal, sometimes for the slightest sign of human fallibility, is an essential part of the job. Harry's appealing request for informality in Edinburgh was instantly hailed as proof of his amiable nature; when he then made the less populist gesture of travelling first class, with an entourage, for the train journey back to London, the press reproached him for being snooty. The Duke and Duchess are hardly the first in the Royal Family to wonder whether the benefits of their place at the top of British society outweigh the scouring scrutiny that comes with it. Yet it is rare, and captivating, when someone actually acts on such feelings.

The royal dukedom of Sussex, which the Queen granted her grandson only hours before his wedding, is one of the titles that the monarch has bestowed on members of her family, to mark a special occasion or a new phase of life. Prince William, Harry's older brother, and his wife, the former Catherine Middleton, were named the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at the time of their wedding, in 2011. And last year, when the Queen's youngest son, Edward, the Earl of Wessex, turned fifty-five, his mother gave him an additional title: the Earl of Forfar, named for a Lowland town north of the Scottish port of Dundee. The title is for the Earl's use while in Scotland—the honorific equivalent of a sturdy, plaid-lined mackintosh.

If Markle, who grew up middle class in duke-free Los Angeles, Googled the Sussex title before her wedding ceremony, she likely gleaned some insight into the peculiar constraints of the institution she was marrying into. Prince Harry is only the second Duke of Sussex: the title had been extinct for a hundred and seventy-five years before the Palace polished it up for reuse. The first Duke of Sussex was Prince Augustus Frederick, a son of King George III; and, like his great-great-great-great-great-great-nephew Harry, he had a wandering youth, a fiery desire to live as he wished, and an inclination to balk at the strictures of monarchy.

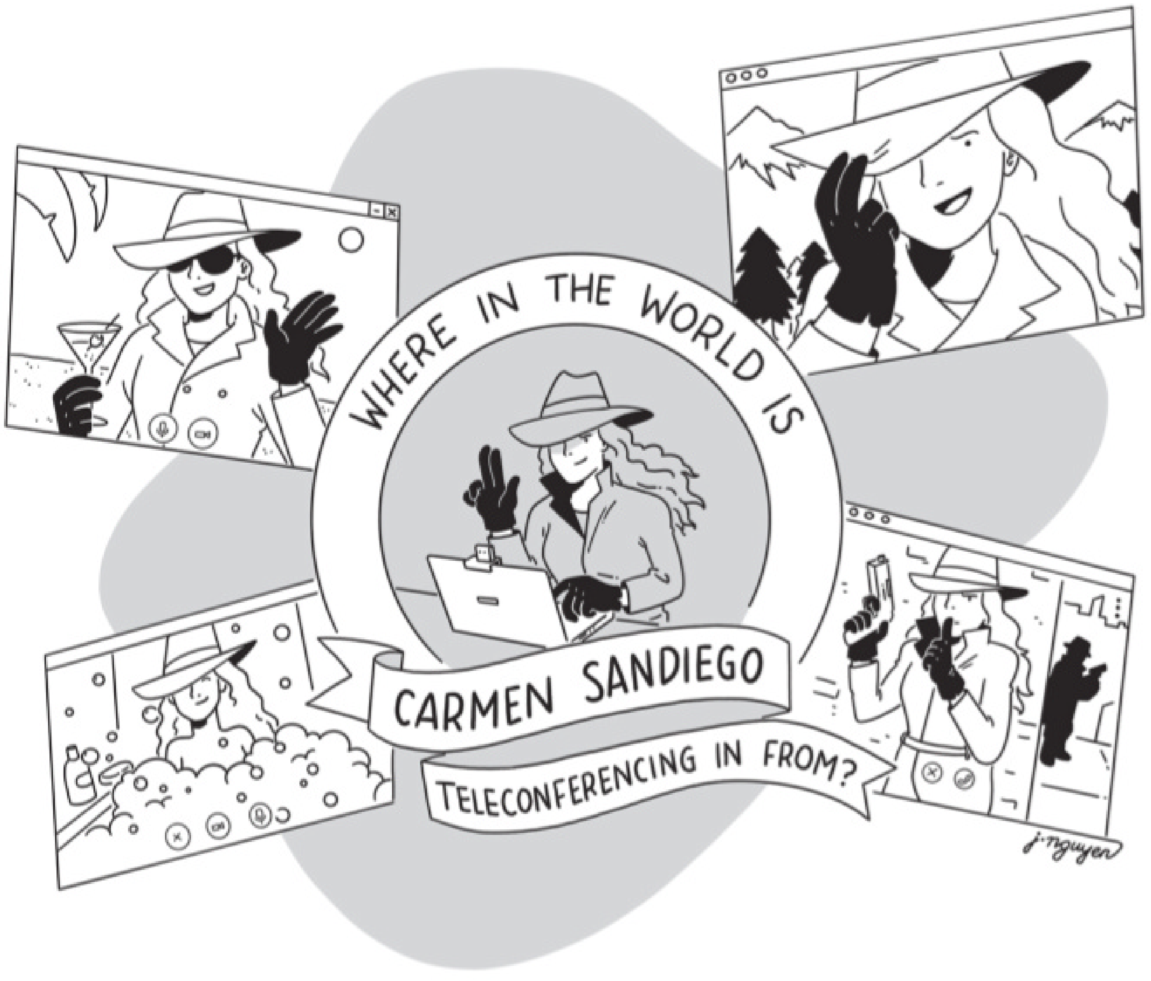
Augustus was born in 1773, a few years before his father lost control of the American colonies. Portraits reveal a good-looking young man with, like Harry, strawberry-blond hair and a ruddy complexion. Augustus had a sensitive brow, voluptuous lips, and a tendency to gain weight—later ceremonial portraits depict him as plump, dressed in tight white britches and velvet robes.

Markle, who spoke her mind politically before joining the Royal Family, which frowns upon such things, might have found much to like about Prince Augustus. He was liberal-minded, and in the later years of his life he supported electoral reform and extending the franchise beyond the gentry. Before meeting Harry, Markle was a United Nations advocate for women, and campaigned for gender equality. Augustus was a royal patron of several charities, including the Jews' Hospital, in London's East End. He claimed that his philanthropic work had made him more aware than other aristocrats of the lives of ordinary British people. "I have every respect for the nobility of the country," he once said, in the House of Lords. "But . . . education ennobles more than anything else."

In terms of education, Markle outstrips her husband, having graduated from Northwestern University before becoming a television actress. Harry achieved undistinguished exam results at Eton, Britain's most élite private school, and instead of attending college he joined the Army for ten years, where he rose to the rank of captain. Prince Augustus was, by contrast, a nerd; he attended the University of Göttingen, in Germany, and eventually amassed a large library of valuable books and manuscripts at his apartments, in Kensington Palace. He owned a collection of sixteenth-century Hebrew Bibles, and studied them with a tutor.

As the ninth child and sixth son of George III, Augustus, like Harry, was never in much danger of succeeding to the throne, and felt burdened by the limitations of being a mere prince. Granted, these were cushy limitations: Augustus grew up attended by servants in royal residences. (When the Prince was a young man, his mother, Queen Charlotte, acquired Frogmore House, where, more than two centuries later, Harry and Meghan held their post-wedding party, with Idris Elba serving as d.j.) When Augustus was in his teens, he expressed interest in joining the Royal Navy or the Church of England, but his father never gave him permission to pursue either path—or any other profession. According to his biographer, Mollie Gillen, Augustus spent his youth travelling around Europe, falling prey to "the uncertainty and boredom" of a life with "no goal to aim for."

Augustus wasn't even free to marry without his father's approval, thanks to the Royal Marriages Act, passed by Parliament in 1772, which stipulated that members of the Royal Family needed the monarch's consent before they could wed—a legislative response to the fact that some of George III's brothers had married women who were considered unsuitable to be queen, because they were widowed, illegitimate, or both. (The stipulation persists, in a modified form: in order for Harry to remain in the line of succession, he was legally obliged to seek the Queen's approval for his marriage, though Markle's status as a divorcée was no longer a deal-breaker.) Augustus felt the law's force when, at the age of twenty, he secretly married Lady Augusta Murray, a noblewoman ten years his senior, in a ceremony held in Rome.



Apparently, Augustus expected his father to grant approval retroactively. He told Augusta, "We shall live very snug, very quietly, *en ton bourgeois;* and surely this is the noblest title we can possess." The King, however, was incensed, and thwarted the marriage, at times foiling the couple's efforts even to live in the same country. Augustus appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Britain's senior cleric, asking for his help in securing permission to live abroad with Augusta, with the understanding that any children born to the couple would not be considered royal. The Archbishop said no, reminding Augustus that, "wherever you go, or wherever you reside, you can never divest yourself of the character of a British Prince."

It's not yet clear how thoroughly Harry and Meghan wish to divest themselves of royalty. Despite Harry's request for first-name informality, he hasn't given up his title of prince, or asked to step out of the line of succession. And though the couple have agreed to pay back the public money—reportedly, about three million dollars—that was spent on renovating Frogmore Cottage, the Windsor Park residence that the Queen bestowed on them, they have shown no sign that they will give up her other wedding gift: the royal dukedom of Sussex. In January, they launched a glossy Sussex Royal Web site, intended to serve as "a source of factual information regarding the workstreams of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex." Their Sussex Royal Instagram account has 11.3 million followers—four million more than that of the Royal Family. At the end of March, the couple indicated that they would suspend their social-media accounts and their Web site, pending a redesign that will omit the word "Royal." But their brand seems robust enough to survive. Earlier this month, they revealed an intention to launch a charitable entity, Archewell, whose name was derived from *arche*, the ancient Greek for "source"; the word was also the inspiration for their son's name.

Harry and Meghan's exit has drawn attention once again to the question of what, exactly, the extended Royal Family is *for*. Prince Charles has expressed a desire to streamline the institution if, as expected, he becomes king; more junior family members would be shuffled off the public stage. He may have been thinking of the predicament of Prince Andrew, his younger brother, who recently stepped back from royal duties after a disastrous interview with the BBC about his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein, the late sex offender. Prince Andrew, like Prince Harry, had a distinguished military career, but he was less admired in his subsequent role as a business envoy for Britain. He had a predilection for expenses-paid travel that earned him the tabloid sobriquet Airmiles Andy.

A distinguished British historian told me, "In the old days, before the First World War, what you did with the secondary royals was marry them off into other royal families, and *that* gave them something to do. In the days of the Empire, you could send them off to go and be governor-general, or to have a full-time military job. These days, being royal, but not being either the heir to the throne or the monarch—it's very hard to carve out a job." At the same time, the historian added, "it's quite difficult *ceasing* to be royal." The Queen's daughter, Anne, the Princess Royal, first found purpose in equestrian pursuits—she represented Britain in the 1976 Olympics; she has since become a stalwart representative of the Crown, and is involved with more than three hundred charities and other organizations. Prince Edward went into the entertainment industry; among his ventures was a television spectacle in which he, Prince Andrew, and Princess Anne dressed up in knightly regalia and participated in a mock chivalric tournament. Edward's production company closed down in 2009, and since then he, too, has become a full-time representative of his mother.

A life of cutting ribbons at hospital openings and chatting with dignitaries is not everyone's idea of fulfillment. Nor is the job as easy as it looks, as Markle discovered during one of her first official engagements, at a garden party in Dublin; she endured a brief scandal after it emerged on Twitter that she'd told an attendee she approved of Ireland's recent decision to legalize abortion. Before Harry met Meghan, he had been in a couple of long-term relationships, but had expressed doubt about finding someone who was willing to be his partner. "You ain't ever going to find someone who's going to jump into the position that it would hold—simple as that," he said, glumly, in a 2013 televised interview conducted from his military posting in Afghanistan, after he had been photographed larking about, naked, in Las Vegas with female companions who had been willing to jump into other positions. In a televised interview that he and Markle gave in 2017, upon their engagement, Harry expressed gratitude for having found not just a wife but "another team player." He added, with a nervous laugh, "The fact that I know she'll be really, unbelievably good at the job part of it as well is, obviously, a huge relief to me." In a public appearance soon afterward, during which they met a group of Welsh schoolchildren, the pleasure Harry took in his new partner was evident. "Everyone give Meghan a group hug!" he told the kids, who mobbed her.

As the Duke and Duchess of Sussex carried out their final round of engagements in the U.K., even the most obdurate anti-monarchist had to concede that something was being lost with their departure. When Markle visited a secondary school in East London, she warmly greeted a sixteen-year-old student named Aker Okoye in front of an assembly hall filled with his peers. Okoye's cheeky response—"She really is beautiful, innit?"—aptly summed up the Duchess's charisma and her gift for connecting, as did her wagging finger of amusement. Markle's initial projects as a working royal indicated that she planned to use her renown as a fashion and life-style tastemaker to draw attention to worthy causes. She quietly volunteered at the Hubb Community Kitchen, founded by survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, then contributed a foreword to a cookbook benefitting the group. In 2019, in collaboration with several British retailers, she helped create a line of clothes for Smart Works, an organization that helps unemployed women dress for job interviews. When she announced the project, she spoke of wanting to provide clothes that couldn't be mistaken for last season's rejects—like the forty lilac-colored blazers she had found in the Smart Works warehouse. At a launch event, Markle said, to approving laughter, "Now, don't get me wrong—it's a great blazer, and I'm sure, for someone, it's *exactly* what she wants to be wearing." She *was* really good at the job part of it.

It was also hard not to appreciate how deftly the couple bid Britain goodbye. Two nights after the Endeavour Fund Awards, Harry and Meghan appeared at the Royal Albert Hall, for the Mountbatten Festival of Music. Harry reminded Britons of his military service by wearing a scarlet mess jacket bedecked with medals, including one from his service as a helicopter gunner. Markle's choice of dress—a crimson floor-length gown with cape shoulders, by the London-based atelier Safiyaa—perfectly matched Harry's uniform. Walt Disney himself could not have dreamed them up. (Indeed, Markle recently recorded the voice-over for a Disney documentary about elephant migration in the Kalahari, which is now available for streaming.)

The Royal Albert Hall event was likely the last time that Harry would be seen in that particular uniform, which indicated his position as the Captain General of the Royal Marines—a role inherited from his grandfather, Prince Philip. Harry is scheduled to step down from this position, and from all other official appointments, by the end of a yearlong transition period instituted by the Palace. At that point, the mystery of royalty will be displaced by the more mundane sheen of celebrity.

Not long ago, I met with Camilla Tominey, an editor at the *Daily Telegraph*, the conservative broadsheet. Tominey has covered the Royal Family, at various publications, for more than fifteen years; in 2016, she broke the story that Prince Harry was dating an American TV actress. On the morning we met, in the lobby of Portcullis House, an office building that serves the Houses of Parliament, Tominey was sleekly put-together—she was about to appear on TV, to comment on her other beat, Westminster—and she spoke with

"She was Zen five minutes ago."

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fluid assurance on the Sussex drama.

"When Meghan arrived here, she was really well received," Tominey told me. There was happiness and relief that Harry had found such an impressive woman. As one of Princess Diana's sons, he had always been dear to the British public, but he was known as a Jack-the-lad, with a penchant for boorish revelry. "Too much Army, and not enough prince," as Harry himself put it, in his post-Vegas interview. Tominey went on, "When we wrote the story initially, it was kind of couched in 'How did he score this amazing girl?' She was this extremely glamorous woman who had a lot to say for herself, and had an interesting past as a campaigner for women's rights. She was a woman who meant business, and it looked like she would be an instant asset to the Royal Family."

Markle was an instant asset for reporters, too. Harry might have been expected to choose a well-born young lady whose life had been only gauzily chronicled in *Tatler*. Markle had an apparently bottomless online footprint. There were the many interviews she had given as a successful actress, and the revealing photographs she'd posed for as just an aspiring one. In 2014, she had even created her own Web site, the Tig, which was named for her favorite wine, a Tuscan red called Tignanello. Markle had characterized the site as "a hub for the discerning palate—those with a hunger for food, travel, fashion & beauty." On the Web site, which was taken down after the couple's relationship became known, she and other contributors dispensed food and travel tips: one post touted the Fat Radish, "a delightful and delicious British (yes, British!) restaurant" on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where Markle appreciated the peekytoe-crab gratin and the "happy, bright vibe." She had also written more substantial essays, including one in *Elle* about her biracial identity; she described how her mother, who is African-American, had been mistaken for her nanny when she was a baby, and how a teacher once told her to check the box for "Caucasian" on a mandatory census form, saying, "Because that's how you look, Meghan." Markle wrote that she didn't check any box, noting, "I couldn't bring myself to do that, to picture the pit-in-her-belly sadness my mother would feel if she were to find out." Markle also had conveniently indiscreet relatives, including a half sister, Samantha, who could speak no right of her (on Twitter, Samantha called Meghan "duchASS"), and a father who had declared bankruptcy in 2016, before moving to Mexico, and seemed easily swayed by the opening of a checkbook. The warmth of the press's welcome was, in part, excitement over a good story.

But, Tominey explained, Markle soon had critics inside the Palace who were less enamored of the very qualities that made her irresistible to the press: her showbiz lustre, self-confidence, and feminist habits of assertion. Reports emerged that, in the run-up to the wedding, she was being imperious. The *Daily Mail* gave an account of a "dictatorial" Markle seeking to spritz musty St. George's Chapel with air fresheners before the ceremony (a charge rebutted by friends of the bride). Tominey said, "I've put it down to a clash of cultures, in the sense that she had come from the celebrity world, which is very fast-paced and quite demanding. The royal world is very different—it's much slower-paced, and hugely hierarchical. In the royal world, it's 'What should we do next?' 'Well, what did we do *last* time?'" Markle may not have comprehended how many unwritten traditions governed the institution she was joining. Tominey explained, "It's a bit like 'Downton Abbey'—there's a hierarchy of staff who have been at Buckingham Palace for years and years, to serve Queen and country. And, therefore, for Harry and Meghan to be making demands, there was a bit of below-stairs chatter, particularly with the Duchess, that was 'Well, hang on a minute, who do you think you are?'"

Royal reporters soon had their own reasons for being antagonistic. There was considerable irritation at Harry and Meghan's efforts to circumvent traditional practices of covering the Royal Family. Especially egregious, from some journalists' point of view, was the obfuscation over the birth of Archie, in the spring of 2019. The Palace issued a statement that the Duchess of Sussex had gone into labor "in the early hours of this morning" on the afternoon of May 6th; in fact, the birth had taken place hours before the statement was released. It could be argued that it is an outrageous invasion of an expectant mother's privacy for the progress of her child's birth to be chronicled as global news. Nevertheless, the press corps concluded that Harry and Meghan were trying to render them irrelevant.

Richard Kay, a longtime royal commentator at the *Daily Mail*, told me, "There has always been a compact between the press and the royals that has worked—they need us, and we need them." In the eighties and nineties, Kay covered Princess Diana, whose modus operandi was very different: she called broadcasters and newspaper editors or invited them to lunch, in the hope that, if they knew her, they would report more favorably on her. Prince Harry is about as likely to start inviting editors to lunch as he is to embark upon a Ph.D. in astrophysics.

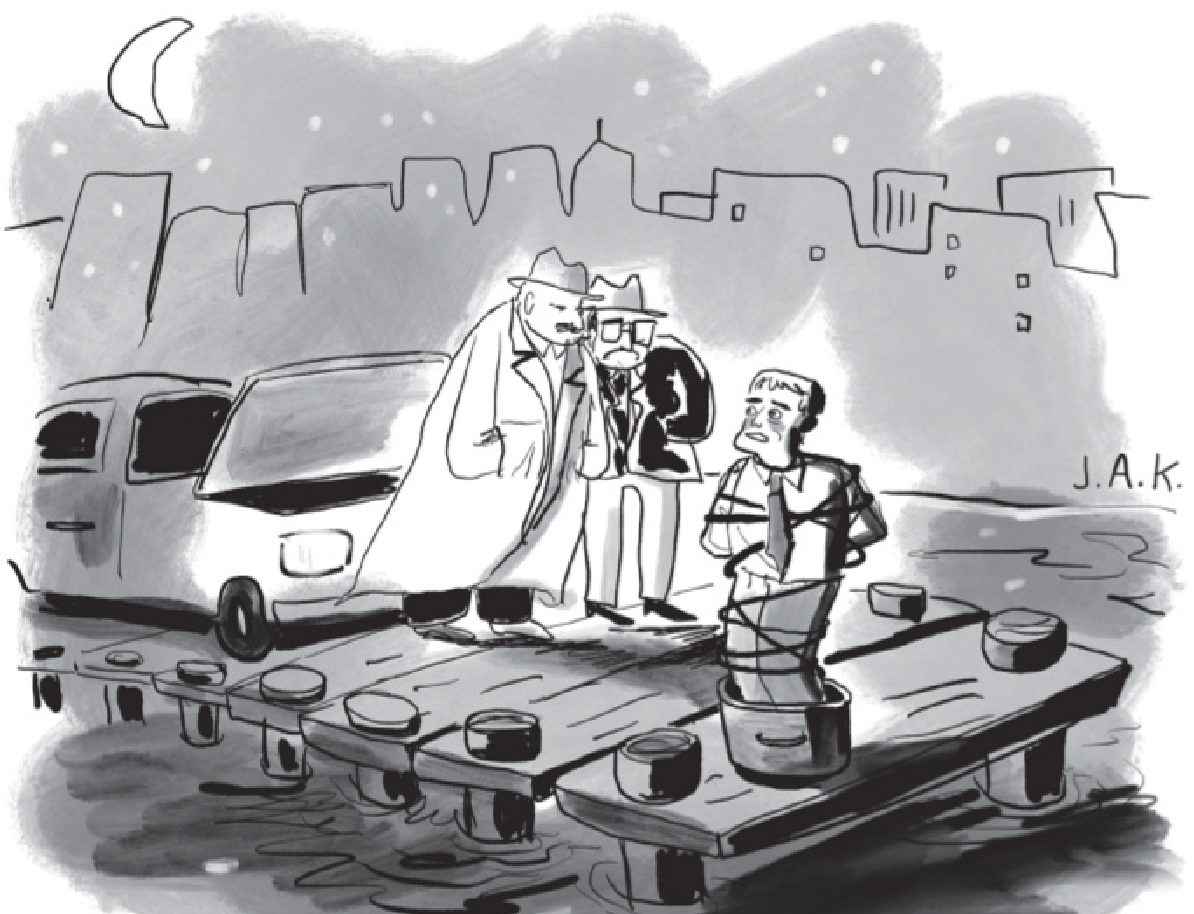
The memory of Diana colors any discussion of Prince Harry. A few years ago, he began speaking in public about how thoroughly he had suppressed his grief following the loss of his mother, who died when he was twelve, in a car crash in Paris, while being chased by paparazzi. In 2017, Harry gave an interview to Bryony Gordon, the host of "Mad World," a podcast on mental-health issues, in which he admitted that he had been "very close to a complete breakdown on numerous occasions," and that he had sought professional help. Last fall, while the Sussexes were in Africa, on a foreign tour on behalf of the Queen, Harry and Meghan spoke with the journalist Tom Bradby. "Every single time I see a flash, it takes me straight back," Harry said. Markle revealed that she had been encouraging Harry—or Aitch, as she calls him—to reconsider his impulse to press dutifully on. "It's not enough to just survive something, right?" she said. "Like, that's not the point of life. You've got to *thrive*."

Judging by Harry's recent remarks, it appears that, in the years since his mother's death, Markle was the only person close to him who persuaded him to exchange a stiff upper lip for a trembling lower one. In a documentary that aired in July, 2017, twenty years after Diana's death, Harry made the startling admission that, after her funeral, he'd cried "maybe only once." A person's motivations for falling in love are often mysterious, but it seems evident that Markle not only showed Harry the compassion he'd been deprived of when Diana died; she also gave him an opportunity to serve as the protector he hadn't been able to be for his mother. Before the Africa trip was over, the news broke that Markle was suing the *Mail on Sunday* for publishing portions of a letter she'd written to her father. According to Markle, the extracts—which quoted her telling her father that his "actions have broken my heart into a million pieces"—were misleading, and constituted both a breach of copyright and a violation of privacy. (The newspaper is contesting the lawsuit.) In a forceful statement, the Duke complained that Markle was being subjected to ceaseless criticism, and expressed a fear of "history repeating itself." He wrote, "I lost my mother and now I watch my wife falling victim to the same powerful forces."

Harry shares a temperamental kinship with Diana, Tominey told me: he seems genuinely enthused by charitable work, and has a rapport with children. "He is one of the most impressive royals I've seen in action," she said. "I remember being in a hospital with him, in Barbados, with profoundly disabled children, and he was so good with these kids. I just said to myself, 'He's the real deal. He's got the touch—his mother's touch.'" In 2014, not long before leaving the military, Harry helped create the Invictus Games, a sports competition for wounded ex-servicemen and women. In their royal roles, the Sussexes were expected to follow Diana's emotive, empathetic model, providing a counterpoint to Prince William and his wife, Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, whose public persona has been closer to that of the Queen: irreproachable and inscrutable. The Duchess of Cambridge, after experiencing considerable vilification in the early years of their relationship—she was called Waity Katie, on account of the decade it took the couple to get to the altar—is now widely cherished, but she remains something of a blank screen. The novelist Hilary Mantel, in a subtle essay about royalty and femininity, called her "gloss-varnished."

Tominey noted that Harry's restlessness with his prescribed destiny predated his marriage. In 2007, he publicly expressed a wish to move to Lesotho, where he had founded Sentebale, a charity for children with H.I.V. Tominey said, "This idea that 'I don't like that part of me is owned by the public'—we can all sympathize with that," adding, "I wouldn't want to be part of the Royal Family for all the tea in China."

The thorniest aspect of Megxit has been the debate over whether criticism of the Duchess was motivated by racism. Reporters who cover the royals are indignant at the suggestion, and like to note that Harry himself used to be accused of racial insensitivity. (In 2005, he notoriously wore a Nazi outfit to a



"I feel like this could have been a threatening e-mail."

"native and colonial"-themed party.) Tominey said, "This narrative of 'the press and the public have been attacking us,' and 'there's a racial undertone,' and Prince Harry talking about 'unconscious bias'—people are scratching their heads and saying, 'Well, last time I checked, nobody *I* know ever dressed up as a Nazi for a fancy-dress party.'"

Dickie Arbiter, the royal commentator, told me, "For goodness' sake, the Queen is head of the Commonwealth, and the majority of the Commonwealth is other races—African, Asian, you name it." The fact that some of the Queen's best subjects are black is perhaps not the strongest defense of the royal institution, which is notably lacking in diversity. Princess Michael of Kent, who is married to one of the Queen's cousins, retired a favorite "blackamoor" brooch, featuring a gilded image of an African man, only after being publicly criticized for wearing it to the Christmas banquet at which Prince Harry first introduced his fiancée to his wider family. Whatever Princess Michael's views on race may be, the fact that nobody at the Palace had told her to bin the brooch years earlier suggests a culture of obliviousness.

Not all the scorn levelled at Markle has been racist; some of it has been merely anti-American. When Allison Pearson, the *Telegraph* columnist, derisively took note of the Duchess's "newly-whitened smile," she was partaking in a long-standing British tradition of equating American dental hygiene with American cultural inferiority. Yet some of the coverage of Markle has unequivocally been racist, with the gutter tone set early by a *Daily Mail* headline, in November, 2016, announcing that "HARRY'S GIRL IS (ALMOST) STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON." The accompanying article claimed that the Los Angeles neighborhood where Meghan's mother, Doria Ragland, lived was "plagued by crime and riddled with street gangs." A double standard was clearly in effect for Markle: in 2011, nobody at the Palace seems to have complained when Kate Middleton scented Westminster Abbey with orange-blossom candles. Even positive commentary about the Sussex marriage, or celebrations of Markle's charms, was often racially inflected. The coverage of the couple's relationship exposed the fact that, among some gatekeepers of British culture, it still comes as a surprise to learn that characterizing a woman of color as "exotic" does not amount to a compliment.

Gary Younge, a sociology professor at Manchester University and a former columnist for the *Guardian,* said, "Meghan does seem to be an inadequate vessel for the rage that has been rained on her." Moreover, he went on, pundits who claimed that the marriage of Harry and Meghan proved how far Britain had come were too self-congratulatory. "Mixed-race relationships are neither new nor rare in Britain, and so it shows how far behind the Royal Family is, if anything," Younge said.

Much like President Barack Obama, Markle is a singular figure who was misguidedly heralded as a representative symbol of progress. "On a very basic level, she doesn't come from our nation's dysfunction," Younge noted. In the U.K., the legacy of the nation's colonial history is omnipresent, and there is a less well-established black middle class than exists in America. Younge said, "Most black Britons of Meghan's age—their grandparents or parents would have been bus drivers or nurses or train drivers. They would have had working-class jobs, and the Royal Family *never* marries anybody with a working-class background."

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex made their final appearance as active members of the Royal Family on the afternoon of March 9th, at the sixty-second annual Commonwealth Service.

The celebration, held at Westminster Abbey, is attended by various members of the Royal Family, and marks the Queen's role as head of the Commonwealth, an association of fifty-four nations, most of which are former British colonies. In 2018, Harry was appointed president of the charitable Queen's Commonwealth Trust; last year, Markle was named its vice-president. When the couple became engaged, they spoke with enthusiasm about the idea of spending the better part of their time working on behalf of the Commonwealth. So far, they have indicated that they will maintain their positions with the charity.

That morning, royal fans started gathering along Broad Sanctuary, the road that wends past Westminster Abbey toward Parliament Square. In the square, the flags of the Commonwealth countries fluttered against a low, silvered sky. Claire Aston, a Londoner in her seventies, had been there since early morning. Aston, a former dental nurse in the Women's Royal Air Force, sat on a raised concrete wall, using her copy of the *Daily Telegraph* as insulation from the cold granite. Aston was an old hand: in 2011, she spent three nights sleeping on a yoga mat, in order to have a front-row view, when the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge were married. "I saw *everything*," she told me. "I saw Pippa Middleton's lovely bum." For Harry and Meghan's wedding, in Windsor, she spent only one night outside. "That was the last time I saw Harry," she said, as if talking about a grandson who was too busy to visit.

A group of smartly dressed teen-agers made their way to the entrance to the Abbey. They represented the youth group of a South London church affiliated with the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, a Nigerian denomination. Sarah Arute, a church leader, told me that she was excited when Markle joined the Royal Family: "I felt that there was hope for the future—that the Royal Family was opening up a space for the less in society, so that we have a voice." She was happy to see Markle that day, regardless of the personal choices she and Harry had made. "They are still royals, even if they are not here," Arute said. "Did you see how she looked since she has been away? *Radiant.*"

When the black cars bearing members of the Royal Family approached the Abbey's entrance, there was a flutter of anticipation and a raising of cell phones. First came the Earl and Countess of Wessex—"Who's that?" the crowd murmured—and then the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Markle, in a vivid-green dress with a cape and a matching fascinator, gave a little wave in the direction of the crowd. Harry, who had seen his brother married and his mother eulogized in the Abbey, kept his head down, mouth grimly set. They were followed by close family members, in order of rank: the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, who smiled, professional and wholesome; and, with the Duchess of Cornwall, the Prince of Wales, who entered the Abbey with the soft-stepping dutifulness of one fated to wait until old age to do the job for which he was born. The Queen, who has never missed a Commonwealth Service in the long duration of her reign, was the last to be brought to the entrance. When the door of her burgundy-colored Bentley was opened and she climbed out, dressed in a pale-blue suit and hat, I gasped. Nothing prepares you for the sight of majesty in the form of a very dignified, very tiny, very old lady.

"Most people come up the other side of the mountain."

Television cameras stationed inside the Abbey captured the royal brothers settling awkwardly into their seats as they awaited the Queen. The formerly close bond between Harry and William has reportedly been tested by Harry's choice of what he called, in the Africa-trip interview, a "different path." Camilla Tominey wrote a story in which she revealed that the *Telegraph's* "expert lip reader" had studied the royal interactions and concluded that Harry had said to Meghan, "He literally said, 'Hello, Harry,' and that was it." It would have required an expert mind reader to discern whether the Prince was referring to Prince William or to Boris Johnson, who was in the receiving line, or to someone else entirely. After the service, there would be more body language to parse, but, rather than wait for the royals to leave the Abbey, I went across London, to pay my respects to the first Duke of Sussex.

Prince Augustus Frederick was offered the title of Duke of Sussex by his father in November, 1801—not as a recognition of his marriage to Lady Augusta but as a reward for giving her up. The couple had been forcibly estranged for almost the entire course of their marriage. "I adore you," Augustus wrote to Augusta, during one of their separations. "I am sure I never shall be happy till when we meet again." Things changed in the eighth year of the marriage, when Augusta gave birth to a baby girl, and the Duke came to believe—mistakenly—that he wasn't the father. "What has been so long wished for is at last come to pass," he wrote to his brother, the Prince of Wales. "We are to meet no more."

Augustus gave up Augusta, but he didn't stop challenging the expectations imposed on a prince. After Augusta's death in 1830, he married a second time, again in contravention of the Royal Marriages Act. (In for a penny with your father's face on it, in for a pound.) His second wife was a widow, Lady Cecilia Underwood, with whom he lived in discreet contentment. Cecilia wasn't permitted to take the title of Duchess of Sussex, but Queen Victoria, who ascended the throne in 1838, showed mercy, as only a queen can, by giving her a different title: Duchess of Inverness. Augustus was the young queen's favorite uncle: he gave her away at her wedding, to Prince Albert, in 1840. Augustus was popular among the British people, too, and when he died in 1843, crowds lined the streets to pay their respects. The London *Times* praised him as "a Prince of the blood who had the courage to break a stupid law."

Augustus's distaste for royal conventions continued beyond the grave. He was granted his request not to be buried in St. George's Chapel—where, almost two centuries later, Harry and Meghan began the tumultuous adventure of their married life. Instead, Augustus was interred in a public cemetery, in Kensal Green, in West London. Another of Victoria's uncles, King Leopold I of Belgium, wrote to the Queen to express his disapproval, arguing, "All Princes must stick to their own caste. . . . I do not like the affectation of the contrary."

By the time I arrived in Kensal Green, rain had begun to fall. The cemetery, which was virtually deserted, is wedged between a busy road and a pair of derelict gas holders. A potholed dirt path was edged by neglected burial plots and mausolea. No signs indicated the way to the Duke's grave, but close to the Anglican chapel at the heart of the cemetery I found it: an unshowy granite tomb. Lichen grew on the stone, and the inscription was almost illegible. But on one side of the tomb I could make out "His Royal Highness Augustus Frederick Duke of Sussex," and on the other the name of the Duchess of Inverness, who had been buried beside him after more than three decades of widowhood.

The place felt forlorn, especially after the pomp and circumstance of the Commonwealth celebration. But simplicity was what the Duke had wanted. He had decided, in his own way, to carve out a progressive new role within the institution of the monarchy. He was, the *Illustrated London News* approvingly reported, "the first of a royal race who has chosen to lay his bones in one of the cemeteries of the people." ♦

ANNALS OF MEDICINE

THE GOOD DOCTOR

How Anthony Fauci became the face of a nation's crisis response.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

Just before midnight on March 22nd, the President of the United States prepared to tweet. Millions of Americans, in the hope of safeguarding their health and fighting the rapidly escalating spread of COVID-19, had already begun to follow the sober recommendation of Anthony S. Fauci, the country's leading expert on infectious disease. Fauci had warned Americans to "hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing." Donald Trump disagreed. "WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF," he tweeted.

Trump had seen enough of "social distancing." In an election year, he was watching the stock market collapse, unemployment spike, and the national mood devolve into collective anxiety. "I would love to have the country opened up, and just rarin' to go by Easter," he said, on Fox News. "You'll have packed churches all over our country. I think it'll be a beautiful time."

Trump's Easter forecast came more than two months after the first U.S. case of COVID-19 was identified, in Washington State, and more than a hundred days after the novel coronavirus emerged, first from bats and then from a live-animal market in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Every day, more people were falling sick and dying. Despite a catastrophic lack of testing capacity, it was clear that the virus had reached every corner of the nation. With the Easter holiday just a few weeks away, there was not a single public-health official in the United States who appeared to share the President's rosy surmises.

Anthony Fauci certainly did not. At seventy-nine, Fauci has run the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases for thirty-six years, through six Administrations and a long procession of viral epidemics: H.I.V., SARS, avian influenza, swine flu, Zika, and Ebola among them. As a member of the Administration's coronavirus task force, Fauci seemed to believe that the government's actions could be directed, even if the President's pronouncements could not. At White House briefings, it has regularly fallen to Fauci to gently amend Trump's absurdities, half-truths, and outright lies. No, there is no evidence that the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine will provide a "miracle" treatment to stave off the infection. No, there won't be a vaccine for at least a year. When the President insisted for many weeks on denying the government's inability to deliver test kits for the virus, Fauci, testifying before Congress, put the matter bluntly. "That's a failing," he said. "Let's admit it."

When Trump was not dismissing the severity of the crisis, he was blaming others for it: the Chinese, the Europeans, and, as always, Barack Obama. He blamed governors who were desperate for federal help and had been reduced to fighting one another for lifesaving ventilators. In one briefing, Governor Andrew Cuomo, of New York, said, "It's like being on eBay with fifty other states, bidding on a ventilator." Trump even accused hospital workers in New York City of pilfering surgical masks and other vital protective equipment that they needed to stay alive. "Are they going out the back door?" Trump wondered aloud.

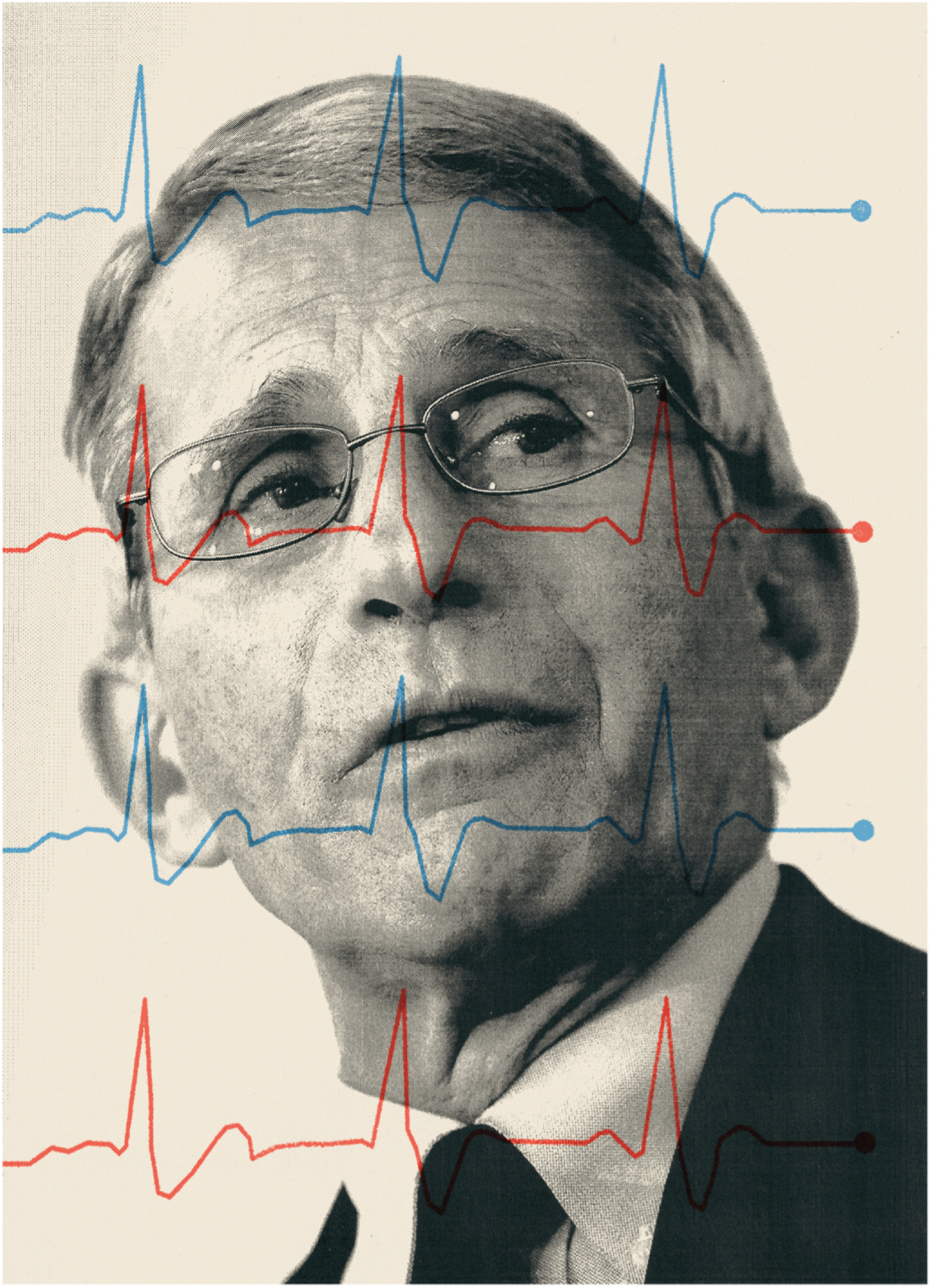
As a reporter who writes mainly on science and public-health issues, I've known Fauci since the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic exploded, in the mid-eighties. He once explained to me that he has developed a method for dealing with political leaders in times of crisis: "I go to my favorite book of philosophy, 'The Godfather,' and say, 'It's nothing personal, it's strictly business.'" He continued, "You just have a job to do. Even when somebody's acting ridiculous, you can't chide them for it. You've got to deal with them. Because if you don't deal with them, then you're out of the picture."

Since his days of advising Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, Fauci has maintained a simple credo: "You stay completely apolitical and non-ideological, and you stick to what it is that you do. I'm a scientist and I'm a physician. And that's it." He learned the value of candor early. "Some wise person who used to be in the White House, in the Nixon Administration, told me a very interesting dictum to live by," he told me in 2016, during a public conversation we had at the fifty-year reunion of his medical-school class. "He said, 'When you go into the White House, you should be prepared that that is the last time you will ever go in. Because if you go in saying, I'm going to tell somebody something they want to hear, then you've shot yourself in the foot.' Now everybody knows I'm going to tell them exactly what's the truth."

Americans have come to rely on Fauci's authoritative presence. Perhaps not since the Vietnam era, when Walter Cronkite, the avuncular anchor of the "CBS Evening News," was routinely described as the most trusted man in America, has the country depended so completely on one person to deliver a daily dose of plain talk. In one national poll, released last Thursday, seventy-eight per cent of participants approved of Fauci's performance. Only seven per cent disapproved.

On March 23rd, Fauci failed to appear at the daily briefing in the White House pressroom. Twitter promptly lost its mind. #NoFauci became a top trending topic, followed closely by #whereisFauci and #letTonyspeak. There was speculation that Trump, who is inclined to fire anyone who disagrees with him or, worse, garners some praise in the media, had lost patience with Fauci. As one of Fauci's old friends told me, "This is a President who doesn't give a shit about Fauci's accomplishments, his history, or his learning. If anything, they're negatives."

The truth was less alarming. "I was



PHOTOGRAPH: WIN McNAMEE / GETTY

"You stay completely apolitical and non-ideological," Fauci says. "I'm a scientist and I'm a physician. And that's it."

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER COMRIE

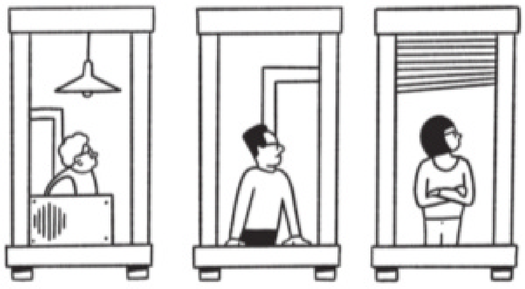
tied up in a task-force meeting, and we were trying to work out some difficult policies," Fauci said. "I have no trouble with the President. When I talk to him, he listens." My experience with Fauci suggested that this last statement was perhaps a triumph of pragmatism over accuracy. His priority, as he's made clear, is to do what is necessary to save lives. So I was not surprised to receive an e-mail from Fauci the following day, saying that he had been asked to refrain from participating in personal profiles. It seemed that it was one thing for him to talk about the news with reporters or even to chat on Instagram with Stephen Curry, the Golden State Warriors star. But focussing on himself, rather than on the President, was another thing entirely.

Fauci and Trump are about as odd a duo as American political life has ever produced. Both men are in their seventies. Both come from the outer boroughs of New York City. Both are direct, even blunt. But that's where the resemblance ends. Fauci has always been a person of unusual discipline. Nearing eighty, he works about eighteen hours a day. Long ago, when his three children were young, he and his wife, Christine Grady, who runs the bioethics department at the National Institutes of Health, decided to maintain the sanctity of family dinners by starting them when he got home from the office, at around nine o'clock. For decades, Fauci has taken long lunchtime runs, but, during the crisis, he's cut back his routine to power walking—and only on weekends. Fauci parses his words with care and believes, above all, in the power of facts and the efficacy of data.

David Baltimore, a Nobel laureate and a pioneer of molecular biology, told me, "Tony is unique, in that he has such credibility with politicians that he's been able to insert hard facts into the conversation. That has been wonderful for our country and the world." According to David Relman, a microbiologist at Stanford University who for years has advised the government on biological threats, "Tony has essentially become the embodiment of the biomedical and public-health research enterprise in the United States. Nobody is a more tireless champion of the truth and the facts. I am not entirely sure what we would do without him."

Fauci can be impatient with the compromises of politics. In my conversations with him, he has responded furiously when a dicey amendment, a bogus rider, or a "poison pill" is attached to a public-health bill. He recalled one congressional provision, in 2016, that tried to make it "legally permissible to fly the Confederate flag at national cemeteries. I am not kidding." When dealing with politicians, he told me, he relies on the pseudo-Latin expression *Illegitimi non carborundum:* Don't let the bastards grind you down. But he has inspired respect throughout the political world and beyond. Fauci's office walls are covered with scores of photographs of him with Presidents, senators, visiting Prime Ministers, business leaders, actors. In October, 1988, George H. W. Bush, during a Presidential debate with Michael Dukakis, was asked who his heroes were. "I think of Dr. Fauci," Bush replied. "You've probably never heard of him. . . . He's a very fine researcher, a top doctor at the National Institutes of Health, working hard, doing something about research on this disease of AIDS."

These days, nearly everyone has heard of Fauci. Pandemic-memorabilia entrepreneurs have put his face on bottle openers, coffee mugs, and bumper stickers: "In Dr. Fauci we trust." The National Bobblehead Hall of Fame and Museum has produced a seven-inch likeness of him, partly to raise money to produce protective gear for medical workers. There's a Facebook group called Dr. Fauci Speaks, We Listen, and another called Dr. Fauci Memes for Social Distance Teens. A petition has circulated to nominate him as *People's* "sexiest man alive."



On right-wing social media and talk radio, Fauci has a different image: he is routinely disparaged as a closet lefty who is exaggerating the threat of the coronavirus. "Has anyone else noticed that every suggestion by Dr. Doom Fauci just happens to also be the worst possible thing for the economy?" the conservative Internet TV host Bill Mitchell tweeted. "That's not an accident folks." An analysis in the *Times* found more than seventy Twitter accounts that have pushed the hashtag #FauciFraud, with some tweeting out anti-Fauci bile hundreds of times a day. "There seems to be a concerted effort on the part of Trump supporters to spread misinformation about the virus," Carl Bergstrom, a professor of biology at the University of Washington who has studied misinformation, told the paper. "There is this sense that experts are untrustworthy, and have agendas that aren't aligned with the people." Fauci has received so many personal threats that the Justice Department recently approved a security detail for him. Fauci shrugged it off, telling reporters, "I've chosen this life."

The crisis that the world now faces comes as no surprise to Fauci. On January 10, 2017, ten days before Trump took the oath of office, Fauci delivered the keynote address at a conference at Georgetown University, titled "Pandemic Preparedness for the Next Administration." After describing his years of managing epidemics, he posed a series of questions to the audience: "Will there be a resurgence of Zika? We're getting into the summer in South America. Are we going to see a resurgence or not? What about influenza? Are we going to get a new pandemic?"

Fauci's last point, he emphasized, was almost certainly the most important: the possibility that some unknown, powerfully infectious pathogen could emerge to threaten the world. "What about things that we're not even thinking about?" he said. He let the question drift out over the hall. "What is for sure," he concluded, "is that, no matter what, history has told us definitively that it will happen."

On the day that Anthony Stephen Fauci was born, the front-page headline in the *Times* was "PRESIDENT TO GIVE EMERGENCY FACTS TO NATION ON RADIO." It was Christmas Eve, 1940. The Second World War had begun, and the United States was less than a year away from joining the fight.

Fauci grew up in southwest Brooklyn, first in Bensonhurst and later in Dyker Heights, where his family ran a pharmacy and lived in an apartment up-stairs. The pharmacy was across the street from the Shrine Church of St. Bernadette. When Mass was finished on Sundays, Fauci recalled, people would walk over to get prescriptions filled and to buy whatever else they needed for the coming week. Tony's father, Stephen, dispensed medications, and was known to customers as Doc. His mother, Eugenia, worked the register, along with his older sister, Denise. From an early age, Tony spent evenings and weekends riding around the neighborhood on his Schwinn, making deliveries.

Fauci's parents were born in New York; one set of grandparents had emigrated from Naples, the other from Sicily. Anthony first took Communion at the age of seven and was confirmed at twelve. He went to elementary school at Our Lady of Guadalupe, in Bensonhurst. "I had no idea at the time when I was there, being taught by the Dominican nuns, that I would be interested in science," he said. "I was interested in a lot of things, mostly sports, but certainly not science."

In those days, baseball was the social glue of Brooklyn. The borough was Dodger territory and Ebbets Field was consecrated ground—but Fauci was devoted to the Yankees, who played in the faraway Bronx. In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, I e-mailed to ask about this anomaly, not necessarily expecting an answer. He replied almost instantly. "You probably are unaware, but half the kids in Brooklyn were Yankee fans," he wrote. "We spent our days arguing who was better: Duke Snider versus Mickey Mantle; Roy Campanella versus Yogi Berra; Pee Wee Reese versus Phil Rizzuto and on and on. Those were the days, my friend."

Fauci has often referred to his father as "laid-back," which, if true, must be a characteristic that skips a generation. "Tony has always been driven," Michael Osterholm, the director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, and a longtime friend of Fauci's, told me. "Whatever he was doing, he had to do it better than anybody else. I don't know if it was certainty or something else. But he was meant to lead. Always. Everyone who knew him knew that. And Tony knew it, too."

In 1954, he began attending Regis, a private Jesuit high school on the Upper East Side. Rigorous, small, competitive, and tuition-free, Regis is considered one of the finest all-male schools in the country. Fauci thrived there, though the commute between Dyker Heights and Eighty-fourth and Madison was long. He once estimated that he had spent the equivalent of seventy days of his teen-age life on the various subways and buses he took to get to and from school.

Fauci revelled in the demanding coursework. "We took four years of Greek, four years of Latin, three years of French, ancient history, theology," he recalled. He developed an ability to set out an argument and to bolster it with evidence—good preparation, it turned out, for testifying before Congress. Last year, at a dinner that Regis held in his honor, he said that the school had taught him "to communicate scientific principles, or principles of basic and clinical research, without getting very profuse and off on tangents."

At the time, though, Fauci had no interest in becoming a doctor. "I was captain of the Regis High School basketball team," he once told me. "I thought this was what I wanted to do with myself. But, being a realist, I very quickly found out that a five-seven, really fast, good-shooting point guard will never be as good as a really fast, good-shooting seven-footer. I decided to change the direction of my career."

At school, Fauci's accomplished peers were headed to careers in medicine, engineering, and the law. At home, he was steeped in the humanities: "Virtually all my relatives on my mother's side—her father, her brother, and her sister's children—are artists." His mother helped tip the balance. "She never really pressured me in any way, but I think I subtly picked up the vibrations that she wanted very much for me to be a physician," Fauci said. "There was this tension—would it be humanities and classics, or would it be science? As I analyzed that, it seemed to me that being a physician was the perfect melding of both of those aspirations."

From Regis, Fauci went on to another

"You can't sleep? Have you tried meditating, then reading for an hour, then going to the couch, then back to bed, then counting backward from ten million, then taking a sleeping pill?"

Jesuit institution, Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts. His high-school faculty had left him little choice in the matter. “They just wouldn’t write a recommendation for you if you wanted to apply to Harvard or to Cornell, or Columbia,” he said. Fauci enrolled in 1958 and was pleased to find that the university took a broad view of premedical studies. He signed up for a program called Bachelor of Arts–Greek Classics–Premed. “It was really kind of bizarre,” he recalled. “We did a lot of classics, Greek, Latin, Romance languages. . . . We took many credits of philosophy, everything from epistemology to philosophical psychology, logic, etc. But we took enough biology and physics and science to get you into medical school.”

During the summers, Fauci worked construction jobs. One year, he found himself assigned to a crew that was building a new library at Cornell Medical College, on the Upper East Side. “On lunch break, when the crew were eating their hero sandwiches and making catcalls to nurses, I snuck into the auditorium to take a peek,” Fauci recalled in 1998, at the medical school’s centennial celebration. “I got goosebumps as I entered, looked around the empty room, and imagined what it would be like to attend this extraordinary institution. After a few minutes at the doorway, a guard came and politely told me to leave, since my dirty boots were soiling the floor. I looked at him and said proudly that I would be attending this institution a year from now. He laughed and said, ‘Right, kid, and next year I am going to be Police Commissioner.’”

THE EX-BASKETBALL PLAYERS

The ex-basketball players
want to tell me what
it was like playing youth
tournaments during
the war how hilariously and
inappropriately they were dressed
this guy was shot they say
pointing to their point guard
now a conductor
a detail that produces roars
he has scars
for a moment I think he’s
going to lift his shirt the quietest
and drollest of the group
instead he talks of an all-night drive back
to Sarajevo in 1995 and how
bandaged and bleeding
into his uniform he told the bus driver
I can’t go back
got out with three friends in
Slovenia 4 A.M.
we took some sleep he says
in the park and phoned a friend of
a friend who asked how we were
three teen-agers in a park at dawn

Fauci graduated first in his class from Cornell in 1966, just as America’s involvement in Vietnam was accelerating. Every new physician was required to perform some kind of military service. “We were gathered in the auditorium at Cornell, early in our fourth year of medical school,” Fauci recalled. “Unlike today, we had only two women in the class and seventy-nine men. The recruiter from the armed forces came there and said, ‘Believe it or not, when you graduate from medical school at the end of the year, except for the two women, everyone in this room is going to be either in the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, or the Public Health Service. So you’re going to have to make your choice. Sign up and give your preferences.’”

Fauci wanted to work in the U.S. Public Health Service; his fallback was the Navy. He got his first choice, and ended up at the National Institutes of Health, which was then establishing itself as the country’s primary center for biomedical research. Nearly everyone in academic medicine spent some time at one of its branches; except for three years back at Cornell to complete his internship and residency, Fauci has spent five decades there.

In 1972, Fauci started as a senior researcher at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. He was drawn to investigating ailments that were difficult but not impossible to treat. “I wanted something that could make you very sick and kill you unless I intervened. And if I intervene, you’re essentially cured,” he told Ushma Neill, the editor of *The Journal of Clinical Investigation*, in 2014. “Now, that seems a little bit too simplistic, but that’s really the nature of most infectious diseases.”

Working in the lab of Sheldon Wolff, Fauci studied the molecular nature of fever. The field of immunology was still young, but scientists were rapidly learning how to manipulate the smallest components of individual cells, which opened the way to a decade of discovery.

Chronic fevers can have a number of underlying causes, among them an uncommon condition known as vasculitis—an inflammation of the blood cells that often occurs when the body’s immune system mistakenly attacks its own blood vessels. Many of Fauci’s vasculitis patients suffered from rare inflammatory diseases, such as granulomatosis with polyangiitis, which damages blood vessels in the lungs, kidneys, and other organs. The disease was almost always fatal.

Fauci and his infectious-disease colleagues at the N.I.H. were frequently asked to visit the National Cancer Institute, which was in the same building as his lab, to consult on patients who were receiving chemotherapy. The drugs

I had this much money in my pocket
we said fine we are O.K. but two days
later we weren't we had just twenty
euros our agent stalling she
didn't want us showing up smelly in
Italy so the friend of a friend took
us in for a few days it was nice showers
hot food no shelling but by day three
claps hands that's it boys so it's time
for our agent to come through and miraculously
she does we're on a train
across Europe as if our homes aren't on
fire sitting with travellers reading
newspapers as if our sisters aren't
being shot and for months the agent
she shopped us around Europe
taking us to tournaments tryouts
maybe our price was too high
the four of us it was fucking hysterical
no one wants a refugee on their team
we were like four monkeys on a rope
That's when they all double over in
laughter and form a circle and hug
and someone changes the subject

—*John Freeman*

suppressed tumors, but they were highly toxic. And they had another side effect, Fauci told me: "Those people are susceptible to a lot of things like infections and bleeding, because the treatment has destroyed their immune systems."

Fauci, together with Wolff, his mentor, wondered if this side effect could be harnessed to help vasculitis patients, whose immune systems were overactive. "I thought if we could somehow give a cancer drug at a low enough dose perhaps we could turn the disease off without any of the secondary complications," he recalled recently. "First we did it in a few patients, and, much to our delight, they had a total remission. Before you know it, we ended up curing a very, very lethal, albeit uncommon, disease."

For the first time, this technique enabled researchers to do effective work on lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and transplant rejection. "If you look at immunology, it has from the very beginning been inextricably linked to infectious diseases," Fauci said. "What is the immune system for? The immune system protects you against invaders from without—microorganisms—as well as, in some cases, the emergence of certain tumors from within."

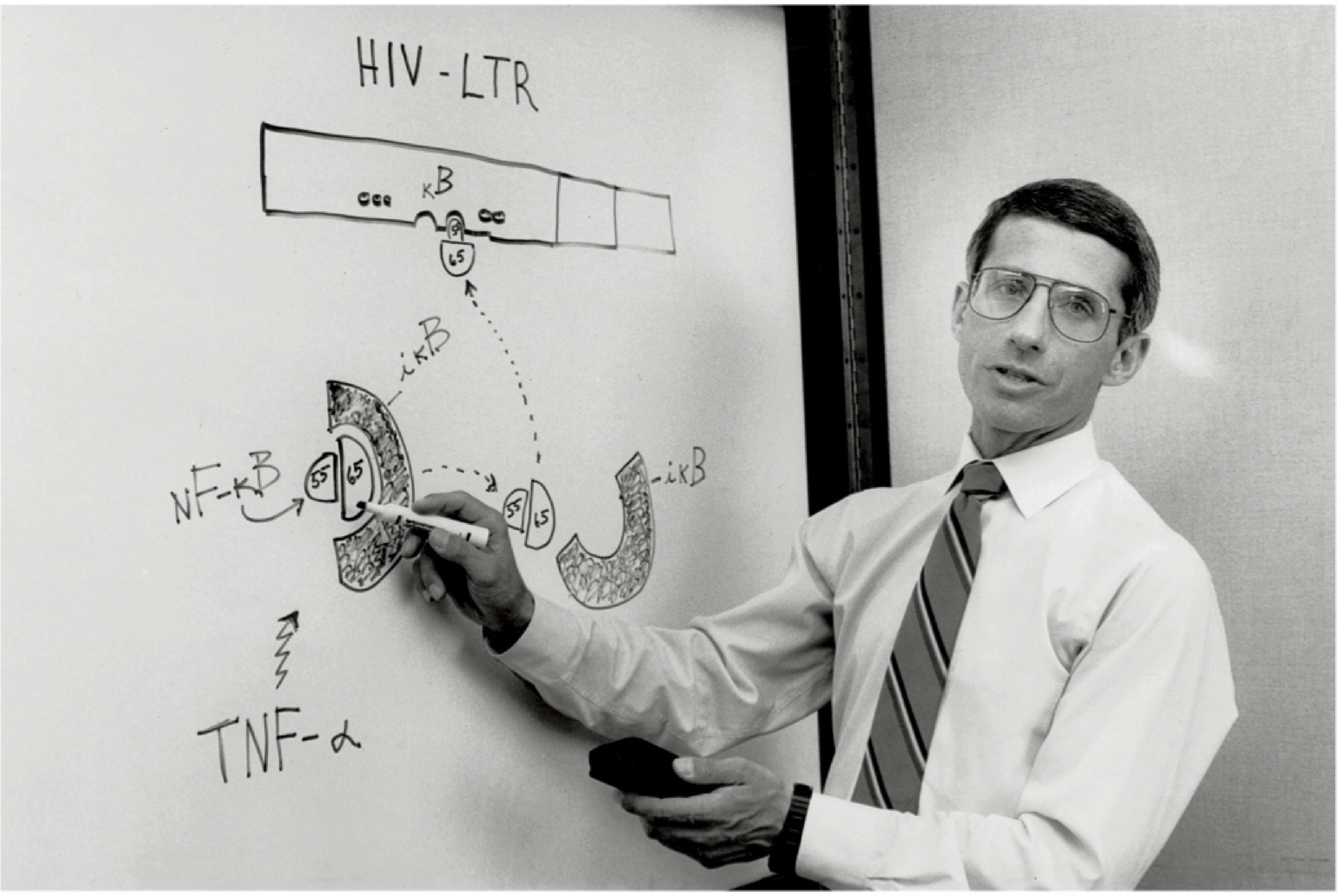
In 1981, a strange new syndrome emerged that transformed Fauci's research and, eventually, the lives of millions of people around the world. "All of a sudden, this new disease comes along," Fauci recalled, referring to what would soon come to be known as AIDS. "Even before the cause of it was proven to be H.I.V., everybody in the field knew that it had to be a virus. I said to myself, 'Here it is, a virus, still to be determined, that's affecting profoundly and destroying the human immune system.'" Fauci believed that he had been training all his life for a threat like this one. He was an expert in viruses and in the immune system—and he had always been attracted to combatting serious, even fatal diseases. "I wanted to be where the action was," he said.

At first, few public-health officials seemed to care. In June of 1981, the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a publication of the Centers for Disease Control, issued a paper that included an account of five young men, all gay, who had contracted pneumocystis, a form of pneumonia that had previously been reported only in people with dramatically impaired immune systems. The young men described in the study had all been healthy. "I thought it was a fluke," Fauci recalled. "I put it aside on my desk, thinking that maybe this was some drug that they had taken that suppressed their immune system."

A month later, an even more alarming report arrived from the C.D.C. Fauci read it with an uneasy sense that a disaster was looming: "I made the decision that I was going to stop what I was doing, much to the chagrin of my mentors, who were saying, 'Why do you want to give up a great trajectory of a career to study a handful of gay men with this strange disease?' But, deep down, I really knew that this was going to explode."

Fauci wrote a paper to sound the alarm. "I called it my *apologia pro vita sua*—an explanation for what I'm doing," he said. In the paper, Fauci pointed out that, although the disease "seems to selectively affect a particular segment of our society," it demanded a medical solution. Moreover, he warned, "any assumption that the syndrome will remain restricted to a particular segment of our society is truly an assumption without a scientific basis." Fauci sent the manuscript to *The New England Journal of Medicine*, in late 1981. It was rejected. "One of the reviewers said I was being alarmist," Fauci said. He tried a different journal, *The Annals of Internal Medicine*, and the following June the paper was published.

In the laboratory, Fauci began making progress. He had been investigating B cells, which are involved in the production of antibodies. In 1983—before H.I.V. was even known by that name—his lab became the first to report that B cells became hyperactive in patients with AIDS. When a healthy person is invaded by a virus, antibodies mount a defense, but, when H.I.V. hijacked B cells, the antibody system went awry. Fauci and his team had identified one of the crucial features of AIDS. "We made that observation without having any idea of what we were dealing with,"



In 1990, Fauci was the government's leading researcher focussed on the AIDS epidemic.

GEORGE TAMES / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

he said in an interview for an N.I.H. oral history. "I think that speaks for sound scientific and clinical observation." The politics of seeking a cure, though, would be far harder to manage.

On October 11, 1988, more than a thousand AIDS activists gathered outside the headquarters of the Food and Drug Administration, in Rockville, Maryland, to protest the agency's glacial reaction to the epidemic. The activists knew that their community needed new treatments if they were to avoid catastrophe—but they were stymied by the F.D.A.'s drug-approval process, a remarkably inflexible system that typically took years.

That same day, another group of protesters marched onto the campus of the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland. They were headed for Building 31, the home of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Fauci, who had become the institute's director in 1984, was now the government's leading scientist focussed on the AIDS epidemic. Even though he was not running the F.D.A., he appeared almost daily in the media to discuss the crisis. "My face was the face of the federal government," Fauci told me. He was asked the same question nearly every day: why wasn't the government moving faster? It didn't help that the Reagan Administration seemed so indifferent to the plague.

Fauci watched from his office window as activists surrounded the building and tried to scale its walls. Some were dressed in black robes and carried scythes. Many waved pink-and-black banners, bearing the words "NIH Wake Up!" or "Stop Killing Us!" All over campus, a chant could be heard: "Fuck you, Fauci!"

"God, I hated him," Larry Kramer, the writer and activist who helped establish the two most important AIDS advocacy groups in the country, the Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT UP, said. "As far as I was concerned, he was the central focus of evil in the world." Kramer attacked Fauci relentlessly in the media. He called him an "incompetent idiot" and a "pill-pushing" tool of the medical establishment, insulted his wife, and even compared him to Adolf Eichmann. In 1988, Kramer published a scathing open letter. "Anthony Fauci, you are a murderer," he wrote. "Your refusal to hear the screams of AIDS activists early in the crisis resulted in the deaths of thousands of Queers."

As the epidemic spread and the death toll rose, it was common for gay activists to view Fauci and NIAID with rage. Fauci did not control the drug-approval process, but he was seen as a barrier to opening access to clinical trials, in which volunteers could receive potentially lifesaving medications.

For most people infected with H.I.V., taking experimental drugs was the only alternative to simply waiting for death. Yet the F.D.A.'s arcane rules prevented the vast majority of patients from qualifying for trials. For instance, a significant number of H.I.V. patients suffered from pneumocystis pneumonia. The condition—the same one observed in the initial C.D.C. report—could be fatal, so many who had it used an experimental antimicrobial medication called pentamidine, which had proved highly effective. But people who took experimental medications were barred from participating in other clinical trials.

At first, Fauci held to the standard

N.I.H. line that research need not focus on the immediate welfare of patients. "When we had clinical trials, we, the scientific community and the regulatory community, did not listen" to the activists, he recalled. "It was, at the time, an attitude that many of us had, and I probably had it myself." He was right about that. I covered the AIDS epidemic for the Washington *Post*, and it was clear to me that Fauci was inclined to enforce the paternalistic medical tradition in which he had trained: doctors and scientists were unquestioned authorities, and drug development had to follow a rigid process that included animal testing and rigorous clinical trials. Otherwise, the benefits and the risks of these drugs could not be adequately assessed.

In 1987, the F.D.A. approved the first drug to treat H.I.V.—azidothymidine, or AZT—and the announcement was met with a burst of hope. But the drug's liabilities were evident almost instantly. It had harsh side effects, and the benefits wore off; the virus itself soon became resistant to the drug. When new clinical studies began, involving cocktails of AZT and similar compounds, tens of thousands of people asked to participate. Again, though, volunteers were not accepted if they used other experimental drugs. The anger among activists grew more intense. "They started becoming amazingly iconoclastic and confrontational, and that scared the hell out of the scientists, who were fundamentally quite conservative," Fauci told me at his medical-school reunion. "When they were demonstrating on the N.I.H. campus, disrupting Wall Street, disrupting St. Patrick's Cathedral, instead of listening to them, scientists withdrew."

Without entirely understanding his own motives, Fauci decided to look beyond the activists' furious rhetoric and style. He recalls telling himself, "Let me put aside the goth dress—the earrings and the Mohawk haircuts and the black jackets—and just listen to what they have to say. And what they were saying made absolutely perfect sense." It helped that Fauci had something in common with the activists: "They were all New York guys. I had a little affinity to them because I'm a New Yorker. And I said, What would I do if I were in their shoes? And it was very clear: I would have done exactly the same thing."

The activists knew that they were facing a mercilessly lethal disease. In the summer of 1985, I travelled to New York to write my first long story on the toll that the epidemic was taking on the city's gay community. I interviewed dozens of men. To the best of my knowledge, only two of them are still alive: Larry Kramer, who is now eighty-four, and a political activist who prefers to remain anonymous.

Fauci, too, came to understand the severity of the crisis. "Everyone died," he said. "I was used to treating people who had little hope and then saving their lives—that was so wonderful. But, with AIDS in those days, I saved no one. It was the darkest time of my life." Faced with mounting evidence that his cautious approach made no sense, he did something that few public officials do: he reversed himself. Fauci transformed from a conventional bench scientist into a public-health activist who happened to work for the federal government. "I had to change," he told me.

When the demonstrators marched on the N.I.H. campus in 1988, Fauci no longer saw a threat. "I looked at them, and I saw people who were in pain," he recalled in an article in *Holy Cross Magazine*. He asked the police and the F.B.I. not to arrest any of them. Then he invited a handful of protest leaders to his office. "That began a relationship over many years," Fauci said. "They let me into their camp. I went to the gay bathhouses and spoke to them. I went to San Francisco, to the Castro District, and I discussed the problems they were having, the degree of suffering that was going on in the community, the need for them to get involved in clinical trials, since there were no other possibilities for them to get access to drugs. And I earned their confidence."

Fauci, in his mid-forties, was the youngest director of an N.I.H. institute in a century, and he lacked the political influence to act independently. Even in his own field, he struggled to recruit allies. "I couldn't convince my own people in infectious-disease leadership to take on H.I.V./AIDS," he told me. So he created a division within his institute devoted to the disease.

One day, in the late eighties, Fauci asked me to stop by his office in Building 31 on the N.I.H. campus. He told me that he had a wild idea: he wanted to hire Mark Harrington, ACT UP's point man on drug-treatment trials. Harrington, a prominent AIDS researcher and activist, had no formal scientific training. But Fauci, like most of those who had seen him testify before Congress or speak to a crowd, was dazzled by his brilliance.

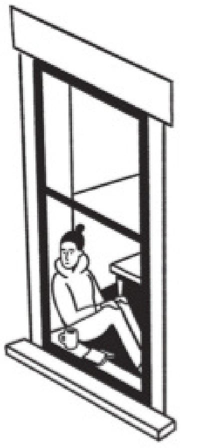
Harrington discussed the idea with Fauci, but decided that the job would be a disaster for him. "There's no way I could have functioned within that bureaucracy," he told me recently. "The people I respect would have seen me as a sellout." Yet Harrington continued to make a profound impression on Fauci's thinking.

Harrington was passionately committed to loosening up the F.D.A.'s restrictive regime. "It was murder," he told me. "I don't know any other way to describe it." Harrington, who went on to win a MacArthur "genius" grant for his work on the disease, established himself as the most knowledgeable student of the agency's byzantine regulations. In meetings with Fauci and other officials, he urged them to move faster and with greater compassion for those who were suffering.

There are three stages in most F.D.A. clinical trials. The first tests whether a drug is safe. The second assesses its efficacy. The last stage, conducted in larger groups, confirms that the drug works and that there are no serious adverse reactions. Harrington argued that people with no alternative should be granted access to those drugs as soon as they had been proved safe, even if their effectiveness remained unknown.

At first, Fauci was concerned that, if people taking multiple experimental medications joined clinical trials, the results would be hopelessly muddled. He was also afraid that granting sick people unrestricted access to unapproved drugs would deter them from participating in the trials at all. Harrington and other activists reassured him that they were committed to strictly monitored drug trials that would provide enough data to know what worked and what did not.

Fauci is a realist, and the facts were obvious to anyone who cared to look. Traditional methods of testing drugs weren't working. Underground networks were growing everywhere. With so many AIDS patients taking untested medications, federal health officials had to concede that their system was broken. Even the most fundamental protocol of a clinical trial—giving some participants a placebo—came into question. In a study conducted in San Francisco in 1989, nearly all the volunteers had their medicine analyzed, to see whether they were receiving an active dose. Those who learned that they had been given placebos almost invariably dropped out.



"There was a feeling in science that doctors know best, scientists know best," Fauci said. "We love our patients, but they don't really know what's best for them. Then, when we dealt with this disease that was brand new—that was frightening, that was killing people in a way that was historic—the people who were impacted by the disease wanted to have something to say about how we conducted research."

There were still moments of confrontation. In May, 1990, hundreds of ACT UP activists returned to the N.I.H., demanding more AIDS treatments and greater representation of women and people of color in clinical trials. At a planning session for the protest, a young activist named Tony Malliaris performed a rap song called "Storm the NIH," which included the lyrics "I don't know what Fauci thinks, but this ain't Denmark, and something stinks." (Malliaris died five years later, still in his early thirties.)

Fauci was undeterred. He threw his influence behind a program called Parallel Track, which made unapproved AIDS drugs available as soon as they were demonstrated to be safe, even as clinical trials were continuing. The initiative would not have succeeded without Fauci. But he always acknowledged that his approach had been shaped largely by the constructive pressure he received from AIDS advocacy groups and from leaders like Harrington.

This more inclusive approach ushered in a revolution in American medicine. Patients today demand as much information as possible about treatments they might receive, and no longer act as if their doctors' advice came straight from Mt. Olympus. They scour the Internet, assemble statistics, and often arrive at the hospital with a folder full of medical information. The F.D.A., for its part, will no longer consider approving a new drug until it has consulted representatives of groups who would use it. "There are strict scientific principles that have to be adhered to in medicine," Fauci told me. "At the same time, a humanistic touch is needed in dealing with people. You have to combine social aspects, ethical aspects, personal aspects with cold, clean science."

In 2002, I wrote a Profile of Larry Kramer for this magazine. By then, he and Fauci had become friends, with each expressing gratitude for the other's work in those years. Fauci told me, "In American medicine, there are two eras: before Larry and after Larry. There is no question in my mind that Larry helped change medicine in this country. When all the screaming and the histrionics are forgotten, that will remain." Kramer, who spent years in a constant rage at Fauci, now calls him "the only true and great hero" among government officials in the AIDS crisis.

As Trump defends his Administration's response to the pandemic, he has suggested repeatedly that COVID-19 was impossible to predict. "There's never been anything like this in history," he said, at a press conference on March 19th. "Nobody knew there would be a pandemic or epidemic of this proportion."

As everyone with even a casual interest in the history of science knows, pandemics have altered the destiny of humanity at least since 430 B.C., when Athens was struck by a plague that killed as many as two-thirds of its residents, just as the Spartans were laying siege. Beginning in 165 A.D., smallpox helped ruin the Roman Empire, sowing more destruction than foreign armies ever could. And, in the fourteenth century, the Black Death swept through Europe, killing more than half the population, according to recent estimates.

Yet, by the middle of the twentieth century, many scientists had begun to conceive of a world that was largely free of infectious epidemics. In 1951, Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet, a future Nobel laureate in medicine, wrote, "The fever hospitals are vanishing or being turned to other uses. With full use of the knowledge we already possess, the effective control of every important infectious disease"—with the exception of polio—"is possible." His optimism was understandable. Antibiotics had made many lethal diseases easy to treat; improvements in sanitary conditions had transformed the lives of hundreds of millions of people. In developed countries, typhoid, cholera, and measles—major killers throughout history—had largely passed into memory; even tuberculosis, one of the great scourges of humanity, had been in decline for nearly half a century. By 1972, Macfarlane, writing with the microbiologist David White, was predicting that the "most likely forecast about the future of infectious diseases is that it will be very dull."

When Fauci was a young trainee, these kinds of predictions sometimes made him wonder if he had picked the wrong career. "I became concerned that I was entering . . . an area of biomedical research that was disappearing," he recalled in one speech. But, since 1984, when Fauci became the director of NIAID, there has not been a single day in which some epidemic has not threatened the globe. According to the World Health Organization, AIDS has killed more than thirty million people, and nearly forty million are now living with H.I.V. Tuberculosis, far from sliding into obscurity, infects roughly a quarter of the human population; the W.H.O. says that one and a half million people died from the disease in 2018.

But the greatest threat that humanity faces, by far, is a global outbreak of a lethal virus for which no treatment has been found. In just a few months, COVID-19 has forced billions of people, in nearly every country on earth, into a panicked withdrawal from society. Another pandemic like this might appear in two years, or in ten, or in a century. But I have never met a virologist or an epidemiologist who believes we won't encounter one.

For a deadly virus to flourish, it must meet three critical conditions. First, a new virus—one to which no one has yet developed immunity—must emerge from the animal reservoirs that produce and harbor such pathogens. Second, the virus has to make humans sick. (The vast majority do not.) Finally, it must be able to spread efficiently, through coughing, sneezing, or shaking hands. That combination is rare, but, when it appears, the consequences are almost always disastrous.

The Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist Joshua Lederberg, who died in 2008, was for years the world's most visionary voice about emerging infectious diseases. "Some people think I am being hysterical, but there are catastrophes ahead," he once wrote. "We live in evolutionary competition with microbes—bacteria and viruses. There is no guarantee that we will be the survivors."

In 2003, Lederberg joined the future F.D.A. commissioner Margaret Hamburg and the pandemic specialist Mark Smolinski to edit a seminal report, in which prominent scientists argued for a much more aggressive defense of the planet. Titled "Microbial Threats to Health," the report recommended that the U.S. greatly expand its early-warning systems, particularly in the developing world. It also urged leaders to strengthen their ability to respond to microbial threats, with new efforts on the federal, state, and local levels. The recommendations were almost completely ignored.

The next year, a highly pathogenic form of avian influenza, H5N1, leaped from waterfowl to chickens and then to humans. Public-health officials were petrified. In Bangkok, I met with Scott Dowell, who led the Thailand office of the C.D.C.'s International Emerging Infections Program. "The world just has no idea what it's going to see if this thing comes," he told me. He paused and then reframed his thought. "When, really. It's when. I don't think we can afford the luxury of the word 'if' anymore."

In a sense, the world was lucky with H5N1. Although the U.S. and other countries mounted a diffident response, the virus turned out to be deadly but not very contagious. Five years later, the situation was reversed. A new influenza virus, designated H1N1, infected nearly a quarter of the global population before vaccines became widely available. This time, the virus was highly contagious but not nearly as deadly as most strains of influenza. The fact that the outbreak was less virulent than public-health officials had feared created its own danger; by encouraging complacency, it did more to expose the world to the risk of a devastating new pandemic than anything else that had happened in decades.

Although Congress had appropriated money to stockpile antiviral medications and protective gear, many scientists felt that the effort was grossly insufficient. "We spend many billions of dollars every year on missile-defense systems," Seth Berkley, a medical epidemiologist who leads the Global Vaccine Alliance, told me. "And yet we will not spend pennies on the dollar to prepare for a catastrophe that is far more likely to affect us all."

After the Ebola outbreak of 2014, Barack Obama implemented one of Lederberg's central recommendations: he established the White House's National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense, an early-warning system for disease in the developing world. Trump disbanded it in 2018, as part of an effort to streamline the N.S.C. In an appearance before Congress, Fauci was asked if the decision was a mistake. He responded diplomatically: "I wouldn't necessarily characterize it as a mistake. I would say we worked very well with that office. It would be nice if the office was still there."

The combination of money and political will can have extraordinary effects on public health. Under the George W. Bush Administration, Fauci was the principal architect of a landmark

"Standing before you is a modern satyr—sensitive, respectful, and a very good listener."

program called PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

By the time Bush took office, therapies for H.I.V. had become widely available in Western countries. But, for millions of people in the developing world, these drugs were too expensive or too difficult to obtain. Bush felt that it was unacceptable for the poorest people on earth to die because they could not afford medication that was dispensed routinely in the rich world. He asked Fauci to implement an initiative to prevent and treat H.I.V. on a global scale. It has been uniformly held up as a model of the ways in which global public-health programs can save lives. "PEPFAR has turned around declining life expectancies in many countries and likely saved some countries—even an entire continent—from economic ruin," Harold Varmus, a former director of the N.I.H. and of the National Cancer Institute, wrote in the quarterly journal *Science & Diplomacy*.

But Fauci has at times struggled to compel politicians and businesses to attack the problems that he considers most worrisome. Over the years, he has become concerned about the possible impact of new viruses, particularly a lethal strain of influenza. Other viruses are more consistently deadly; some, like measles, are more contagious. But no virus that we know of is capable of killing as rapidly and as efficiently. "We need a major paradigm shift with influenza vaccines," Fauci told me, four years ago. "The situation is a mess."

Because the flu virus evolves so rapidly, experts deciding how to formulate vaccines can make only a highly educated guess about which strains are most likely to make people sick. Each February, epidemiologists study outbreaks around the world—especially in the Southern Hemisphere, where flu season is under way—to assess which strains might make their way north. The result is always better than nothing. In many years, though, it is woefully inadequate. In the flu season of 2014-15, the vaccine protected less than a fifth of the people who received it. In 2017-18, it worked for a little more than a third.

Fauci has long supported the development of an alternative: a universal influenza vaccine, which would provide lasting defense against all strains. "Similar to tetanus, a universal flu vaccine probably would be given every ten years," he said. "And, if you get one that is really universal, you can vaccinate just about everyone in the world." But such a vaccine would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to develop and test—and would replace a product that most consumers already think of as good enough. No one has come close to raising the money that such a project will require.

By the beginning of the new millennium, it had become clear that the next microbial threat might not come from a bat or a duck. It could just as well be created by a human being. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, anonymous letters laced with deadly anthrax spores began arriving at media companies and congressional offices. In the following months, twenty-two people were infected by inhaling anthrax and five died. Suddenly, biological terror posed an entirely new threat—one that has become only more significant and complex in the ensuing years. In 2016, James Clapper, who was the director of National Intelligence during the Obama Administration, listed gene editing as a potential weapon of mass destruction. Many scientists were furious, but he had a point. Researchers have deployed these tools to rewrite the genes of mosquitoes so that they are unable to transmit malaria. If their success in the lab translates to the field, it will be a historic triumph. But the research also raises an alarming possibility: if a scientist can modify the genes of an insect to protect people from malaria, he could almost certainly use the same technology to add a deadly toxin.

Fauci often cites a similar but more immediate paradox. Thanks to genetic engineering, we are more equipped than ever to respond to the threat of a viral pandemic. After the COVID-19 outbreak began, it took scientists less than a month to sequence the genome of the virus. By the end of February, the instructions were on the Internet, and the virus had been re-created in laboratories around the world, by scientists seeking to develop drugs and vaccines.

And yet, despite our mastery of molecular biology, we live in an era in which someone can wake up with an infection in China—or France, Australia, or any other place with an airport—and fly to San Francisco in time for dinner, spreading the virus long before he suspects that there's anything wrong. For most of human history, a virus like COVID-19 might have killed many people in the community where it originated, but then stopped spreading. According to a comprehensive analysis carried out by the *Times*, at least four hundred and thirty thousand people have arrived in the U.S. on direct flights from China since the outbreak began. Forty thousand have arrived in the two months since Trump imposed restrictions on travellers from China trying to enter the country.

Fauci insists that an adequate defense against future pandemics will have to be flexible. "I have been saying for eight, ten years that we should make a list of microbes and try to develop a basic platform vaccine," he told me in 2016. A platform vaccine addresses an entire class of virus, not just a particular strain. "We keep trying to develop a vaccine for one thing—usually the last one—and it's a waste of time," he said. "Every time we get hit, it is always something we didn't expect. So, instead of predetermining what it is you're going to prepare for, make universal platforms."

Such an approach is eminently possible. Using gene-sequence information and synthetic DNA, biologists are now capable of making parts of a vaccine in advance. It takes almost no time to sequence a viral strain, and with that information it should be possible to complete a bespoke vaccine in a matter of weeks. "You could build a chassis for the vaccine, and you would have it on the shelf," Fauci said. "Then all you would need to do is insert the gene of the protein you want to express and make a gazillion doses and send it out."

There are even more futuristic aspirations: the genomics pioneer J. Craig Venter has proposed using a sort of 3-D printer to manufacture vaccines on demand. It is already possible to print the nucleotides that make up DNA and assemble them. Venter argues that, in the time it takes for an infected person to fly from one side of the world to the other, we should be able to print, assemble, and administer a vaccine.

To even contemplate creating these kinds of treatments, Fauci says, would require building an entirely new system for making vaccines before a pandemic arises. But, in addition to the scientific obstacles, this would cost billions of dollars, and no company or politician has been willing to spend the money. Perhaps, just as AIDS transformed our approach to clinical trials, our experience with COVID-19 will change our attitudes about preventing infectious diseases. A proper investment in both research and emergency preparedness would have prevented at least some of the unspeakable human loss we are now experiencing and the economic crash that has just begun.

The COVID-19 epidemic will eventually fade, but the public will demand a reckoning. Inevitably, there will be an investigation, along the lines of the 9/11 Commission, to look into the ramifications of the President's denialism, the shortages in testing and medical equipment, and the dismissal of so many warning signs. Fauci will not necessarily escape criticism. He is an excellent spokesman for the value of scientific research, but he runs a single institute, and he lacks the authority to broadly reshape our response to pandemics. "The kinds of things we really desperately need as foundational tools for dealing with this stuff aren't necessarily research enterprises," Harold Varmus told me. "Tony isn't running C.D.C. He's not running FEMA. To tell him to stockpile defense mechanisms or to move forward surveillance tools into massive operations around the world—that's just not his remit."

Even Fauci's current value as a scientific adviser has been limited by the President's contempt for expertise. Trump's coronavirus kitchen cabinet consists of people like his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who has no medical knowledge or experience managing crises—yet has been appointed to direct the response to the biggest medical emergency since the influenza pandemic of 1918. Trump has also turned for advice to Dr. Mehmet Oz, who for years has endorsed worthless treatments and used his television show to promote notorious quacks. Trump even seems to think that his trade adviser, Peter Navarro, should debate Fauci about the value of specific drugs. When Navarro, who has a doctoral degree in economics, was asked about his medical qualifications, he said, "I have a Ph.D. And I understand how to read statistical studies, whether it's in medicine, the law, economics, or whatever."

Among Navarro's enthusiasms is the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, which he believes could cure COVID-19. There is currently no evidence to support this conclusion, as Fauci has pointed out on several occasions. On April 5th, as Trump continued to tout the drug as a miracle cure, a reporter at the daily briefing asked Fauci to comment. Trump refused to allow him to speak. In an appearance two days later, Trump kept up the hype. "I say try it," he said. "You're not gonna die from this pill." Not long afterward, he even suggested that zinc might help.

To plan a coherent biological future, rather than simply scramble to contain each new pandemic, will require an entirely new kind of political commitment. It would certainly include the creation of a permanent position, a special assistant to the President for biological defense. Similar jobs have existed in the past, but not for long, and not with enough influence to matter. David Relman, the Stanford professor, told me, "This kind of job needs somebody with the authority to preside over domestic and international threats, both natural and deliberate. And that person has to sit in the White House with immediate access to the President. Without that, we will really have nothing that can work."

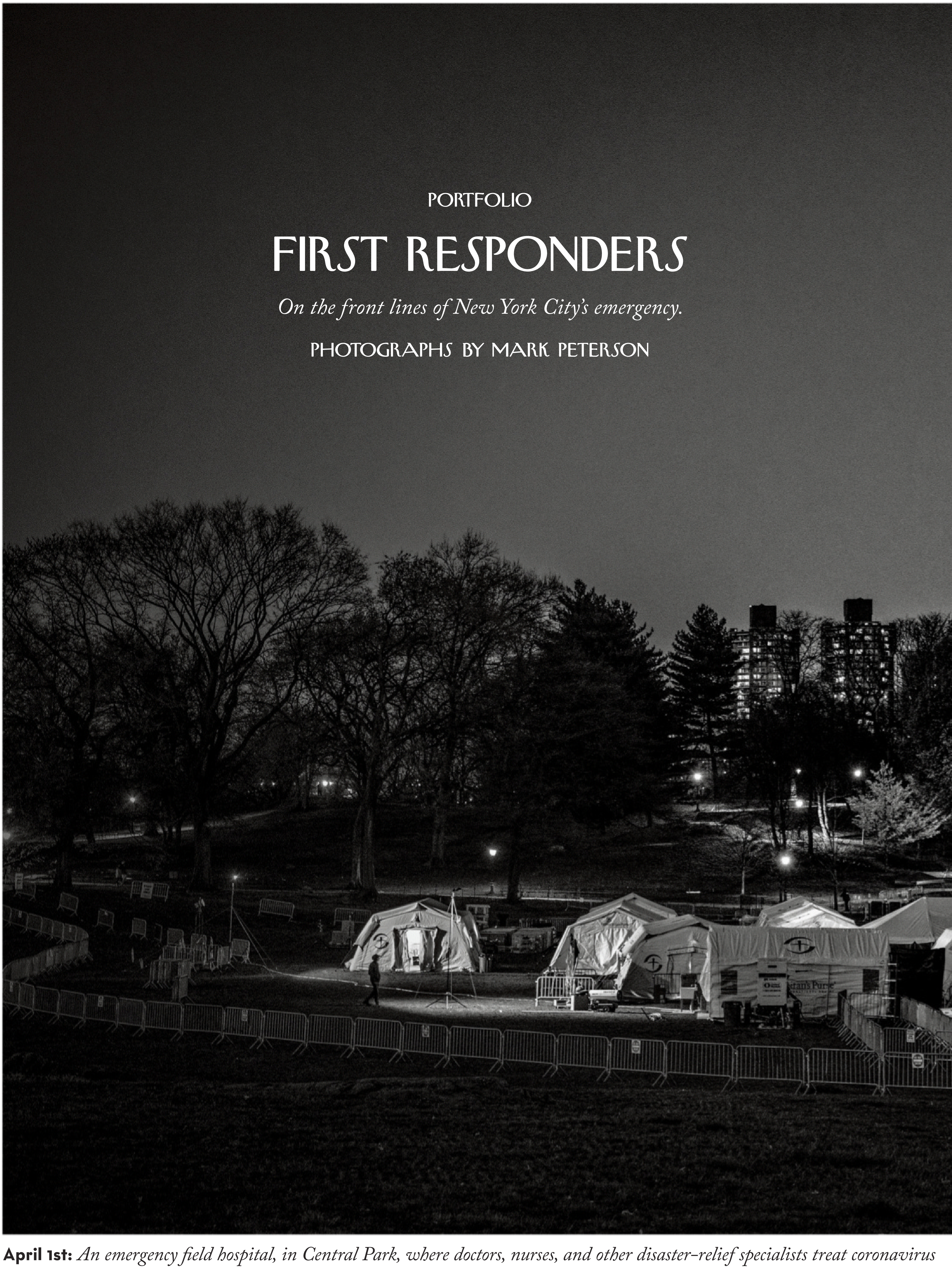
Until then, we have Fauci, a seventy-nine-year-old infectious-disease expert pinned between Donald Trump and the American people. It can't be easy. As Fauci recently put it, with characteristic candor, "I give the appearance of being optimistic. But, deep down, I just do everything I possibly can, assuming that the worst will happen, and I've got to stop the worst from happening." ♦

PORTFOLIO

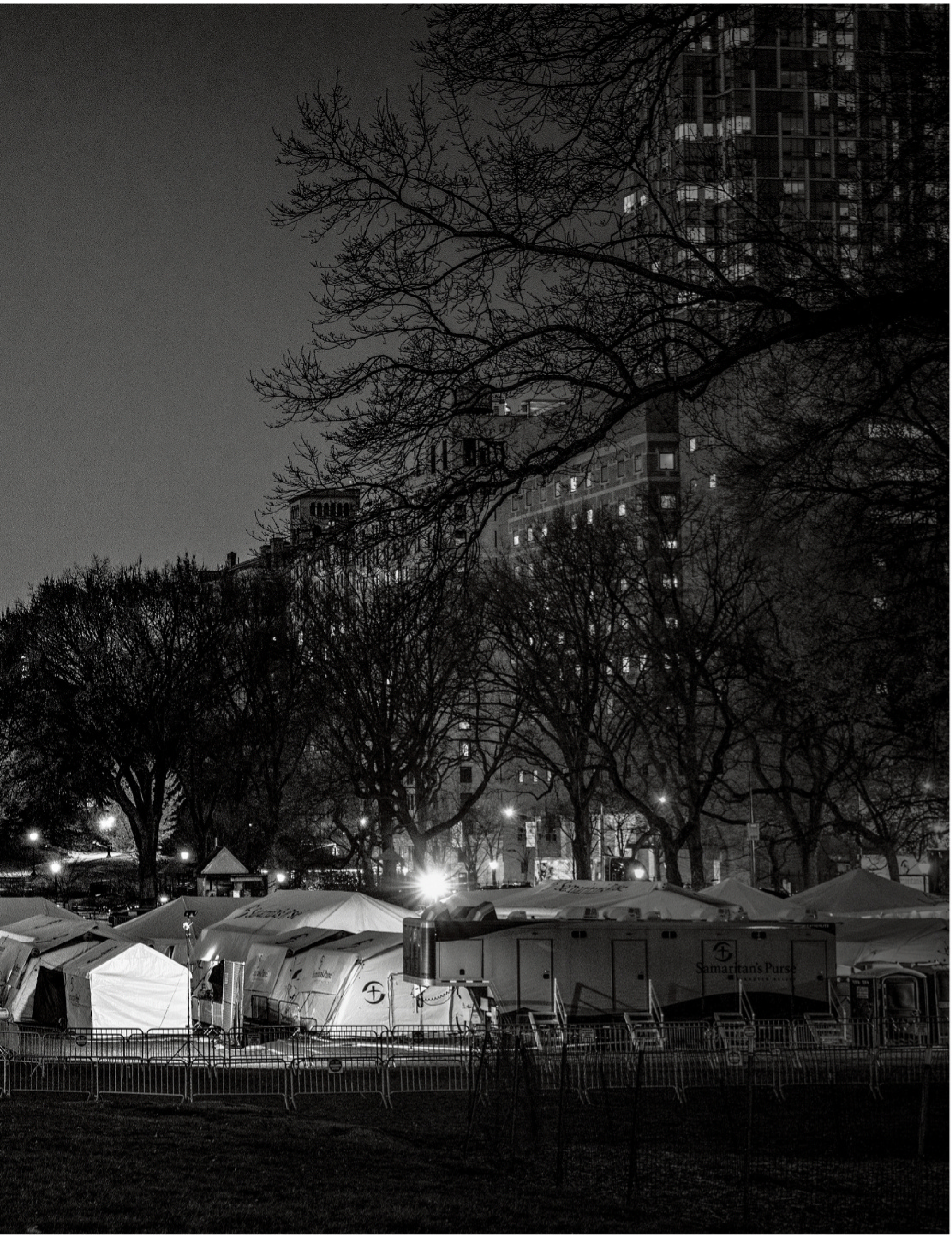
FIRST RESPONDERS

On the front lines of New York City's emergency.

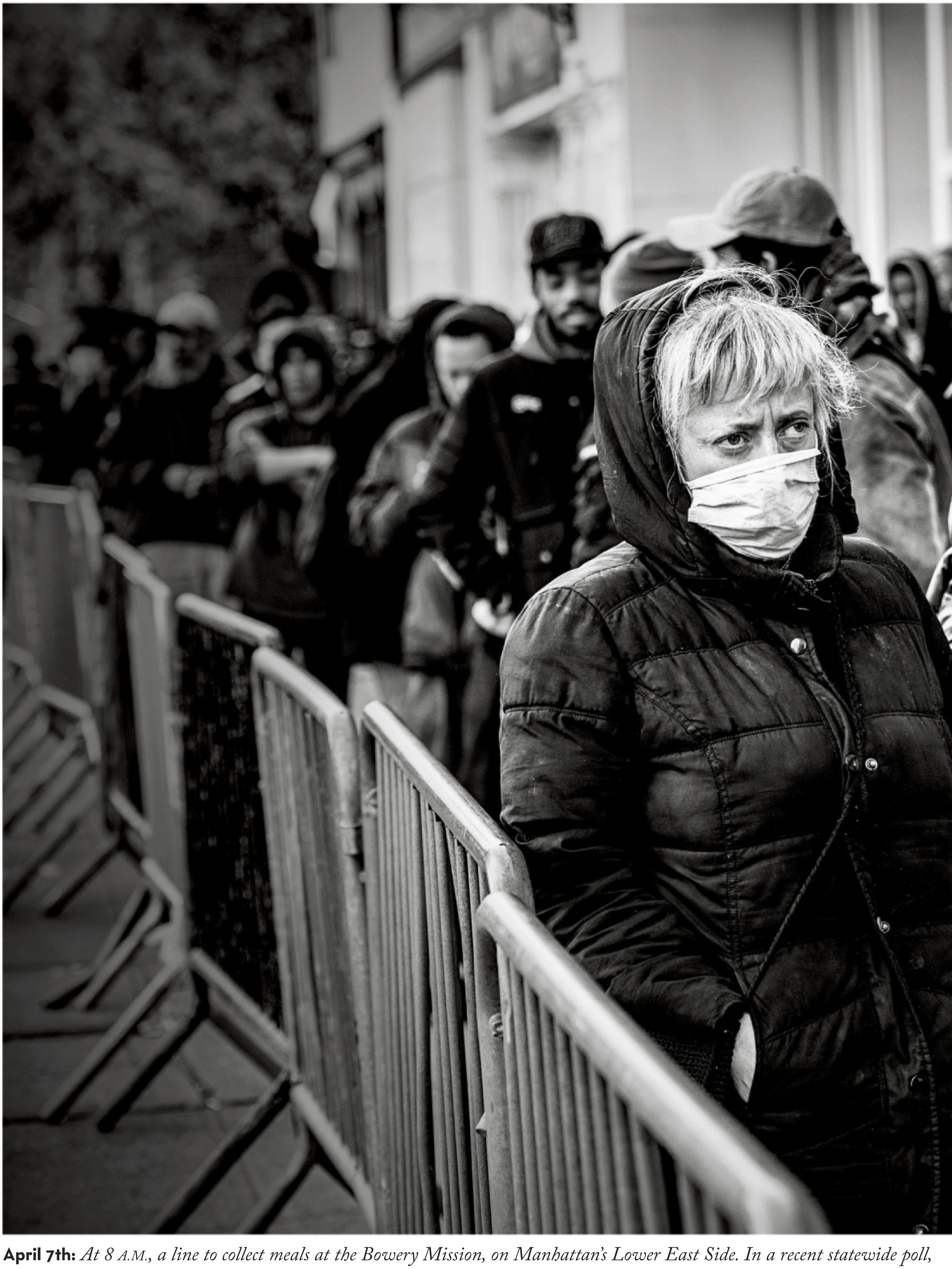
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PETERSON



April 1st: *An emergency field hospital, in Central Park, where doctors, nurses, and other disaster-relief specialists treat coronavirus*


Samaritan's Purse

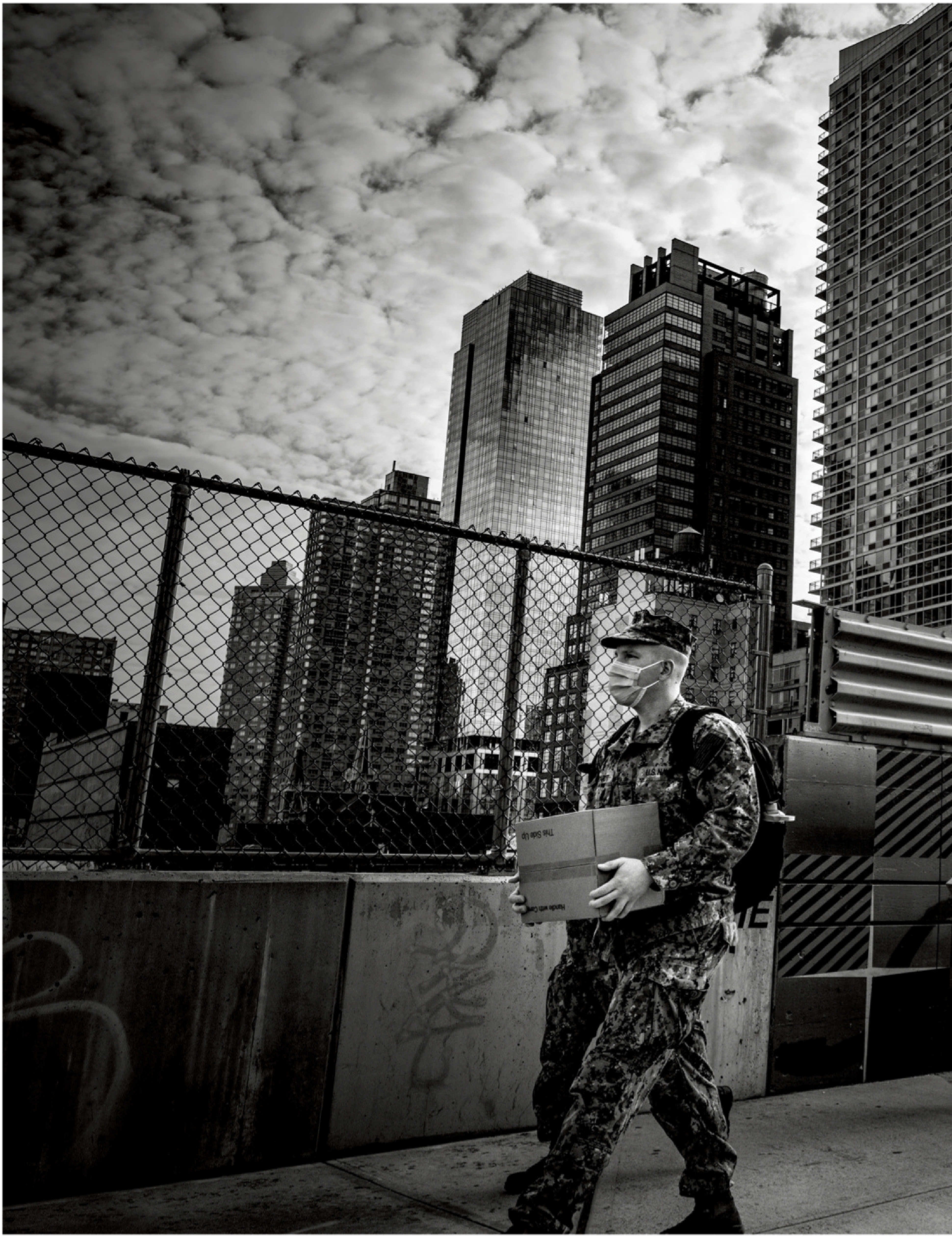
patients. Many medical facilities in the city, like Mount Sinai Hospital, nearby, have been overwhelmed by cases.



April 7th: *At 8 A.M., a line to collect meals at the Bowery Mission, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. In a recent statewide poll,*

REDUX

forty-one per cent of New Yorkers said that they were concerned about being able to afford food.


This Side Up
Handle with Care
U.S. NAVY

April 7th: *Armed-forces personnel arrive at the Javits Center, in Manhattan. The field hospital, which is expected to have*

3M
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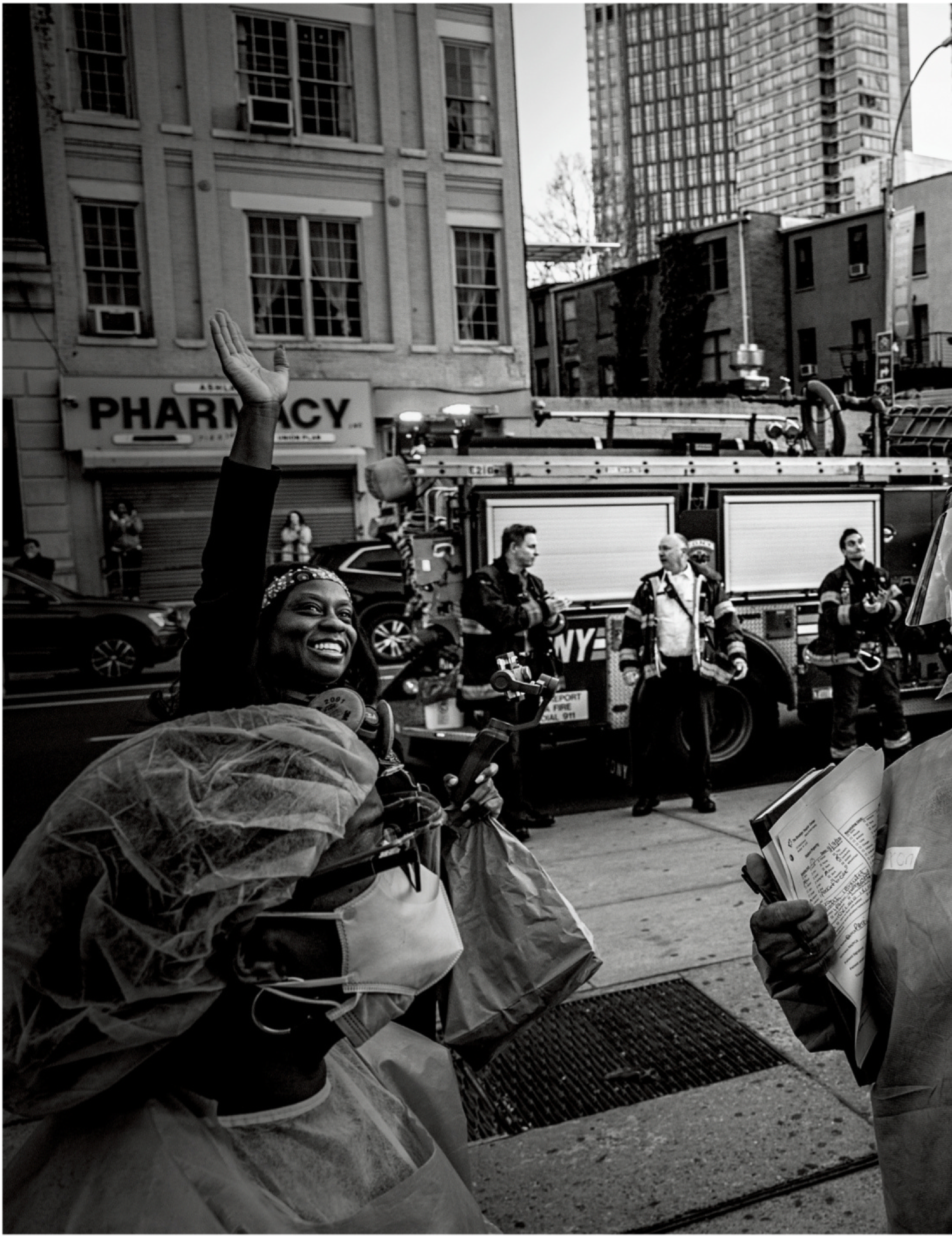
thousands of beds, has come under criticism for being slow to accept patients.



April 7th: *Firefighters clap for medical workers outside the Brooklyn Hospital Center. Every evening at 7 P.M. for several weeks,*

The Brookly
PIZZA

New Yorkers all across the city have paused to applaud health-care workers.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

ENABLER-IN-CHIEF

Mitch McConnell's refusal to rein in Trump is looking riskier than ever.

BY JANE MAYER

On Thursday, March 12th, Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, could have insisted that he and his colleagues work through the weekend to hammer out an emergency aid package addressing the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, he recessed the Senate for a long weekend, and returned home to Louisville, Kentucky. McConnell, a seventy-eight-year-old Republican who is about to complete his sixth term as a senator, planned to attend a celebration for a protégé, Justin Walker, a federal judge who was once his Senate intern. McConnell has helped install nearly two hundred conservatives as judges; stocking the judiciary has been his legacy project.

Soon after he left the Capitol, Democrats in the House of Representatives settled on a preliminary rescue package, working out the details with the Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin. The Senate was urgently needed for the next steps in the process. McConnell, though, was onstage in a Louisville auditorium, joking that his opponents "occasionally compare me to Darth Vader."

The gathering had the feel of a reunion. Don McGahn, Donald Trump's former White House counsel, whom McConnell has referred to as his "buddy and co-collaborator" in confirming conservative judges, flew down for the occasion. So did Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, whose Senate confirmation McConnell had fought fiercely to secure. Walker, the event's honoree, had clerked for Kavanaugh, and became one of his lead defenders after Kavanaugh was accused of sexual assault. McConnell is now championing Walker for an opening on the powerful D.C. Court of Appeals, even though Walker has received a "not qualified" rating from the American Bar Association, in part because, at the age of thirty-eight, he has never tried a case.

Another former Senate aide of McConnell's, a U.S. district judge for the Eastern District of Kentucky, Gregory Van Tatenhove, also attended the Louisville event. His wife, Christine, is a former undergraduate scholar at the McConnell Center—an academic program at the University of Louisville which, among other things, hosts an exhibit honoring the Senator's career. Recently, she donated a quarter of a million dollars to the center.

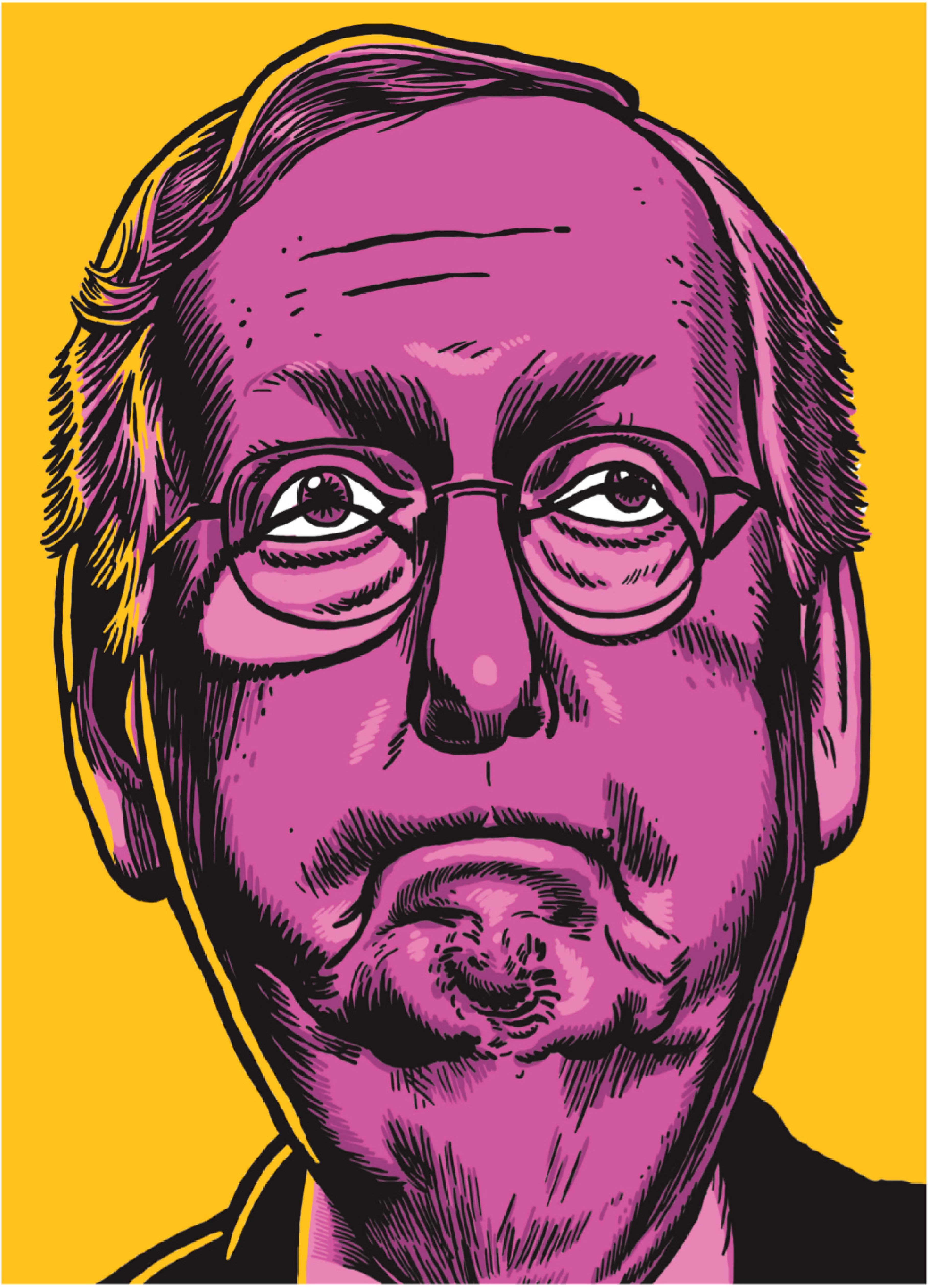
McConnell, a voracious reader of history, has been cultivating his place in it for many years. But, in leaving Washington for the long weekend, he had misjudged the moment. The hashtag #WheresMitch? was trending on Twitter. President Trump had declared a national emergency; the stock market had ended one of its worst weeks since the Great Recession. Nearly two thousand cases of COVID-19 had already been confirmed in America.

Eleven days later, the Senate still had not come up with a bill. The *Times* ran a scorching editorial titled "The Coronavirus Bailout Stalled. And It's Mitch McConnell's Fault." The Majority Leader had tried to jam through a bailout package that heavily favored big business. But by then five Republicans were absent in self-quarantine, and the Democrats forced McConnell to accept a $2.1-trillion compromise bill that reduced corporate giveaways and expanded aid to health-care providers and to hard-hit workers.

McConnell, who is known as one of the wiliest politicians in Washington, soon reframed the narrative as a personal success story. In Kentucky, where he is running for reëlection, he launched a campaign ad about the bill's passage, boasting, "One leader brought our divided country together." At the same time, he attacked the Democrats, telling a radio host that the impeachment of Trump had "diverted the attention of the government" when the epidemic was in its early stages. In fact, several senators—including Tom Cotton, a Republican from Arkansas, and Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut—had raised alarms about the virus nearly two months before the Administration acted, whereas Trump had told reporters around the same time that he was "not concerned at all." And on February 27th, some three weeks after the impeachment trial ended, McConnell had defended the Administration's response, accusing Democrats of "performative outrage" when they demanded more emergency funding.

Many have regarded McConnell's support for Trump as a stroke of cynical political genius. McConnell has seemed to be both protecting his caucus and covering his flank in Kentucky—a deep-red state where, perhaps not coincidentally, Trump is far more popular than he is. When the pandemic took hold, the President's standing initially rose in national polls, and McConnell and Trump will surely both take credit for the aid package in the coming months. Yet, as COVID-19 decimates the economy and kills Americans across the nation, McConnell's alliance with Trump is looking riskier. Indeed, some critics argue that McConnell bears a singular responsibility for the country's predicament. They say that he knew from the start that Trump was unequipped to lead in a crisis, but, because the President was beloved by the Republican base, McConnell protected him. He even went so far as to prohibit witnesses at the impeachment trial, thus guaranteeing that the President would remain in office. David Hawpe, the former editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, said of McConnell, "There are a lot of people disappointed in him. He could have mobilized the Senate. But the Republican Party changed underneath him, and he wanted to remain in power."

Stuart Stevens, a longtime Republican political consultant, agrees that McConnell's party deserves a considerable share of the blame for America's COVID-19 disaster. In a forthcoming book, "It Was All a Lie," Stevens writes that, in



McConnell, who's far less popular than Trump in Kentucky, rose in state polls after defending him at the impeachment trial.

ILLUSTRATION BY WARD SUTTON

accommodating Trump and his base, McConnell and other Republicans went along as Party leaders dismantled the country's safety net and ignored experts of all kinds, including scientists. "Mitch is kidding himself if he thinks he'll be remembered for anything other than Trump," he said. "He will be remembered as the Trump facilitator."

The President is vindictive toward Republicans who challenge him, as Mitt Romney can attest. Yet Stevens believes that the conservatives who have acceded to Trump will pay a more lasting price. "Trump was the moral test, and the Republican Party failed," Stevens said. "It's an utter disaster for the long-term fate of the Party. The Party has become an obsession with power without purpose."

Bill Kristol, a formerly stalwart conservative who has become a leading Trump critic, describes McConnell as "a pretty conventional Republican who just decided to go along and get what he could out of Trump." Under McConnell's leadership, the Senate, far from providing a check on the executive branch, has acted as an accelerant. "Demagogues like Trump, if they can get elected, can't really govern unless they have people like McConnell," Kristol said. McConnell has stayed largely silent about the President's lies and inflammatory public remarks, and has propped up the Administration with legislative and judicial victories. McConnell has also brought along the Party's financial backers. "There's been too much focus on the base, and not enough on business leaders, big donors, and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page," Kristol said, adding, "The Trump base would be there anyway, but the élites might have rebelled if not for McConnell. He could have fundamentally disrupted Trump's control, but instead McConnell has kept the trains running."

McConnell and the President are not a natural pair. A former Trump Administration official, who has also worked in the Senate, observed, "It would be hard to find two people *less* alike in temperament in the political arena. With Trump, there's rarely an unspoken thought. McConnell is the opposite—he's constantly thinking but says as little as possible." The former Administration official went on, "Trump is about winning the day, or even the hour. McConnell plays the long game. He's sensitive to the political realities. His North Star is continuing as Majority Leader—it's really the only thing for him. He's patient, sly, and will obfuscate to make less apparent the ways he's moving toward a goal." The two men also have different political orientations: "Trump is a populist—he's not just anti-élitist, he's anti-institutionalist." As for McConnell, "no one with a straight face would ever call him a populist—Trump came to drain the swamp, and now he's working with the biggest swamp creature of them all."

When Trump ran for President, he frequently derided "the corrupt political establishment," saying that Wall Street titans were "getting away with murder" by paying no taxes. In a furious campaign ad, images of the New York Stock Exchange and the C.E.O. of Goldman Sachs flashed onscreen as he promised an end to the élites who had "bled our country dry." In interviews, he denounced his opponents for begging wealthy donors for campaign contributions, arguing that, if "somebody gives them money," then "just psychologically, when they go to that person they're going to do it—they *owe* him."

McConnell, by contrast, is the master of the Washington money machine. Nobody has done more than he has to engineer the current campaign-finance system, in which billionaires and corporations have virtually no spending limits, and self-dealing and influence-peddling are commonplace. Rick Wilson, a Never Trumper Republican and a former political consultant who once worked on races with McConnell's team, said, "McConnell's an astounding behind-the-scenes operator who's got control of the most successful fund-raising operation in history." Former McConnell staffers run an array of ostensibly independent spending groups, many of which take tens of millions of dollars from undisclosed donors. Wilson considers McConnell, who has been Majority Leader since 2015, a realist who does whatever is necessary to preserve both his own political survival and the Republicans' edge in the Senate, which now stands at 53–47. "He feels no shame about it," he said. "McConnell has been the most powerful force normalizing Trump in Washington."

Al Cross, a columnist and a journalism professor at the University of Kentucky, who is considered the dean of the state's political press corps, believes that McConnell's partnership with Trump "is the most important political relationship in the country." He had hoped that McConnell would push back against Trump. After all, past Republicans have crossed party lines to defend democracy—from censuring Joe McCarthy to forcing the resignation of President Richard Nixon. "But Trump and McConnell have come to understand each other," Cross said. "The President needs him to govern. McConnell knows that if their relationship fell apart it would be a disaster for the Republican majority in the Senate. They're very different in many ways, but fundamentally they're about the same thing—winning."

In a forthcoming book, "Let Them Eat Tweets," the political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson challenge the notion that the Republican Party is riven between global corporate élites and downscale white social conservatives. Rather, they argue, an "expedient pact" lies at the heart of today's Party—and McConnell and Trump embody it. Polls show that there is little voter support for wealthy donors' agenda of tax cuts for themselves at the expense of social-safety-net cuts for others. The Republicans' 2017 tax bill was a case in point: it rewarded the Party's biggest donors by bestowing more than eighty per cent of its largesse on the wealthiest one per cent, by cutting corporate tax rates, and by preserving the carried-interest loophole, which is exploited by private-equity firms and hedge funds. The legislation was unpopular with Democratic and Republican voters alike. In order to win elections, Hacker and Pierson explain, the Republican Party has had to form a coalition between corporatists and white cultural conservatives who are galvanized by Trump's anti-élitist and racist rhetoric. The authors call this hybrid strategy Plutocratic Populism. Hacker told me that the relationship between McConnell and Trump offers "a clear illustration of how the Party has evolved," adding, "They may detest each other, but they need each other."

Although the two men almost always support each other in public, several members of McConnell's innermost circle told me that in private things are quite different. They say that behind Trump's back McConnell has called the President "nuts," and made clear that he considers himself smarter than Trump, and that he "can't stand him." (A spokesman for McConnell, who declined to be interviewed, denies this.) According to one such acquaintance, McConnell said that Trump resembles a politician he loathes: Roy Moore, the demagogic former chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, whose 2017 campaign for an open U.S. Senate seat was upended by allegations that he'd preyed on teen-age girls. (Moore denies them.) "They're so much alike," McConnell told the acquaintance.

McConnell's political fealty to Trump has cost him the respect of some of the people who have known him the longest. David Jones, the late co-founder of the health-care giant Humana, backed all McConnell's Senate campaigns, starting in 1984; Jones and his company's foundation collectively gave $4.6 million to the McConnell Center. When Jones died, last September, McConnell described him as, "without exaggeration, the single most influential friend and mentor I've had in my entire career." But, three days before Jones's death, Jones and his two sons, David, Jr., and Matthew, sent the second of two scorching letters to McConnell, both of which were shared with me. They called on him not to be "a bystander" and to use his "constitutional authority to protect the nation from President Trump's incoherent and incomprehensible international actions." They argued that "the powers of the Senate to constrain an errant President are prodigious, and it is your job to put them to use." McConnell had assured them, in response to their first letter, that Trump had "one of the finest national-security teams with whom I have had the honor of working." But in the second letter the Joneses replied that half of that team had since gone, leaving the Department of Defense "leaderless for months," and the office of the director of National Intelligence with only an " 'acting' caretaker." The Joneses noted that they had all served the country: the father in the Navy, Matthew in the Marine Corps, and David, Jr., in the State Department, as a lawyer. Imploring McConnell "to lead," they questioned the value of "having chosen the judges for a republic while allowing its constitutional structures to fail and its strength and security to crumble."

John David Dyche, a lawyer in Louisville and until recently a conservative columnist, enjoyed unmatched access to McConnell and his papers, and published an admiring biography of him in 2009. In March, though, Dyche posted a Twitter thread that caused a lot of talk in the state's political circles. He wrote that McConnell "of course realizes that Trump is a hideous human being & utterly unfit to be president," and that, in standing by Trump anyway, he has shown that he has "no ideology except his own political power." Dyche declined to comment for this article, but, after the coronavirus shut down most of America, he announced that he was contributing to McConnell's opponent, Amy McGrath, and tweeted, "Those who stick with the hideous, incompetent demagogue endanger the country & will be remembered in history as shameful cowards."

"If you don't want me to sound like that when I imitate you, then don't sound like that when you talk to me."

McConnell also appears to have lost the political support of his three daughters. The youngest, Porter, is a progressive activist who is the campaign director for Take On Wall Street, a coalition of labor unions and nonprofit groups which advocates against the "predatory economic power" of "banks and billionaires." One of its targets has been Stephen Schwarzman, the chairman and C.E.O. of the Blackstone Group, who, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, has, since 2016, donated nearly thirty million dollars to campaigns and super PACs aligned with McConnell. Last year, Take On Wall Street condemned Blackstone's "detrimental behavior" and argued that the company's campaign donations "cast a pall on candidates' ethics."

Porter McConnell has also publicly criticized the Senate's confirmation of Justice Kavanaugh, which her father considers one of his greatest achievements. On Twitter, she accused Kavanaugh's supporters of misogyny, and retweeted a post from StandWithBlaseyFord, a Web site supporting Christine Blasey Ford, one of Kavanaugh's accusers. The husband of McConnell's middle daughter, Claire, has also criticized Kavanaugh online, and McConnell's eldest daughter, Eleanor, is a registered Democrat.

All three daughters declined to comment, as did their mother, Sherrill

Redmon, whom McConnell divorced in 1980. After the marriage ended, Redmon, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, left Kentucky and took over a women's-history archive at Smith College, in Massachusetts, where she collaborated with Gloria Steinem on the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. In an e-mail, Steinem told me that Redmon rarely spoke about McConnell, and noted, "Despite Sherrill's devotion to recording all of women's lives, she didn't talk about the earlier part of her own." Steinem's understanding was that McConnell's political views had once been different. "I can only imagine how painful it must be to marry and have children with a democratic Jekyll and see him turn into a corrupt and authoritarian Hyde," she wrote. (Redmon is evidently working on a tell-all memoir.)

Steinem's comment echoed a common belief about McConnell: that he began his career as an idealistic, liberal Republican in the mold of Nelson Rockefeller. Certainly, McConnell's current positions on several key issues, including campaign spending and organized labor, are far more conservative than they once were. But when I asked John Yarmuth, the Democratic congressman from Louisville, who has known McConnell for fifty years, if McConnell had once been idealistic, he said, "Nah. I never saw any evidence of that. He was just driven to be powerful."

Yarmuth, who began as a Republican and worked in a statewide campaign alongside McConnell in 1968, said that McConnell had readily adapted to the Republican Party's rightward march: "He never had any core principles. He just wants to *be* something. He doesn't want to *do* anything."

For months, I searched for the larger principles or sense of purpose that animates McConnell. I travelled twice to Kentucky, observed him at a Trump rally in Lexington, and watched him preside over the impeachment trial in Washington. I interviewed dozens of people, some of whom love him and some of whom despise him. I read his autobiography, his speeches, and what others have written about him. Finally, someone who knows him very well told me, "Give up. You can look and look for something more in him, but it isn't there. I wish I could tell you that there is some secret thing that he really believes in, but he doesn't."

The notion that McConnell started out as an idealist is a staple of most versions of his life story, including his own autobiography, "The Long Game," published in 2016. He describes his awe, as a young congressional intern, at seeing crowds gather on the Washington Mall for Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, in 1963. McConnell, who was on summer break from the University of Louisville, writes that he recognized he "was witnessing a pivotal moment in history."

McConnell was born in Alabama in 1942, and grew up in the segregated Deep South. He spent much of his childhood in Georgia before moving with his family to Louisville, Kentucky, just before his high-school years. His mother, the daughter of Alabama subsistence farmers, was a secretary in Birmingham when she met McConnell's father, a mid-level corporate manager who had grown up in a more prosperous family but had dropped out of college. McConnell, in his autobiography, describes his mother's wedding dowry as little more than "an apple corer and a can opener." But his parents, he writes, gave him a comfortable middle-class childhood and "instilled me with a deep-seated belief in equal and civil rights, which, given their own upbringing in the Deep South, was quite extraordinary." He quotes a moving letter from his father celebrating the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and writes that he, too, supported the legislation. That year, McConnell even voted for Lyndon Johnson for President.

McConnell's book does not mention that his father, who worked in the human-resources department at DuPont, was deposed by lawyers for the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund in a historic racial-discrimination case. Kerry Scanlon, one of the lawyers, told me, "The leadership at that plant seemed to define racism. There was a plantation system in which the black employees did the hardest jobs, like working in front of these open fires where they got burned—and they got the worst pay. There was a systemic pattern of racism." After years of litigation, the company settled the case, for fourteen million dollars.

GOING FULL TERRARIUM

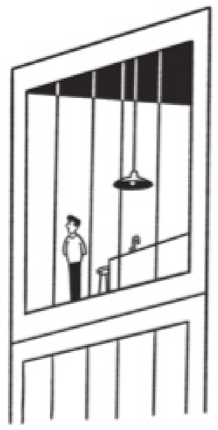
McConnell writes that the formative experience of his early life was contracting polio at the age of two, ten years before Jonas Salk developed his vaccine. McConnell's father was away, having joined the military after the start of the Second World War, and so for the next two years his mother, largely alone, confined him to bed except for a painful daily regimen of exercises. His first memory is of his mother's purchase of a pair of saddle shoes that allowed him to look like other kids once the doctors finally allowed him to walk. He emerged unimpaired, other than having a weak left leg. He credits the experience, and his mother's determination, with giving him the focus and drive that have propelled him throughout his career. Beating polio, he writes, was the first in a lifetime pursuit of hard-fought "wins." In recent weeks, as McConnell has contended with the coronavirus challenge, he has said that it brings back "this eerie feeling" of "fear that every mother had" during a polio epidemic.

An only child, McConnell remained close to his mother, who shared his flinty personality. He also remained devoted to the idea that grit and preparation could beat even the longest odds. He keeps on his office wall a framed copy of a quotation often attributed to Calvin Coolidge, which begins, "Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence." (Some people who knew of this found it ironic when, in 2017, in the Senate, he criticized Elizabeth Warren for refusing to yield the floor, complaining, "She persisted.")

In his book, McConnell recounts a day when his father ordered him to cross the street and beat up an older boy who had been pushing him around. McConnell protested that the boy was bigger, but his father said, "It's time you showed him who's boss." Fearing his father more than the bully, McConnell went over and sucker-punched his neighbor. McConnell writes that the lesson taught him the importance of "standing up for myself, knowing there's a point beyond which I can't be pushed, and being tough." He admits that he's been criticized for his toughness, but adds that "it's almost always worked."

McConnell's first ambition was to be a baseball player. He was a good Little League pitcher, but by middle school his physical limitations ended his hopes. According to people who know him, his box-score approach to politics—"Our team against their team," as one put it—is merely a substitute for his competitive approach to sports.

When McConnell tells the story of his first campaign—for student-council president—what leaps out is that he seemed far more interested in winning the title than in doing anything with it. As an underclassman, he was an introvert who sat by himself in the back of the auditorium at assemblies, and he was dazzled by the student-council president, who "had the envy of everyone." When he confided this to his mother, she encouraged him to run for the position. He told her, "I don't have even one friend." But, McConnell writes, he went ahead, realizing that he could hustle endorsements from popular cheerleaders and athletes by giving them the "one thing teenagers most desire. Flattery." He won. He writes that, upon having his first taste of the respect that comes with holding elected office, "I was hooked."



McConnell was the kind of political nerd who, as a kid, watched both parties' Conventions gavel to gavel, and he soon set his sights on a goal: becoming a U.S. senator. He wrote his college thesis on Kentucky's famed nineteenth-century senator Henry Clay, who was known as the Great Compromiser. The Senate seemed like the ideal place for McConnell: he lacked charisma but had single-minded ambition, as well as a gift for savvy, farsighted planning. He also had a flair for cultivating powerful backers, and for what he has called "calculated résumé-building activities." After college, he got an internship with the Kentucky senator John Sherman Cooper. McConnell describes the glamorous Republican moderate as "the first truly great man I'd ever met." Cooper socialized in Georgetown with the Kennedys, and the press praised him for following his conscience instead of Kentucky polls. He backed the Civil Rights Act and opposed the Vietnam War, telling McConnell that there were times to follow the herd and times to go your own way.

In those days, McConnell opposed the war himself. Nevertheless, in 1967, after graduating from the University of Kentucky's law school, he began serving in the Army Reserve, because, he acknowledges, it was smart politically. Five weeks later, he obtained a medical discharge, for an eye condition. McConnell has claimed that he "used no connections" to get out. But, soon after he enlisted, his father contacted Senator Cooper, who intervened with the commanding officer at McConnell's base. Records show that Cooper pressured the Army to move quickly, suggesting that McConnell had immediate academic plans: "Mitchell anxious to clear post in order to enroll NYU." He never enrolled.

Instead, McConnell began his political climb. It started poorly. In 1971, he ran for the state legislature, but he was disqualified because he didn't meet the residency requirements. He vowed never again to ignore the fine print, and has since become a master of the Senate's arcane rules.

In 1973, during the Watergate scandal, McConnell wrote an op-ed in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* denouncing the corrupting influence of money on politics as "a cancer," and demanding public financing for Presidential elections. To read the op-ed now is head-spinning, given his current views. On closer examination, though, there is a consistency to his flip-flop. His call for reform reflected the political consensus after Nixon's disgrace. In other words, the anti-corruption position he took in 1973 was in his political self-interest, just as his embrace of big money has been in recent decades. As he confessed to Dyche, his biographer, the op-ed was merely "playing for headlines." McConnell, planning to run for office as a Republican, wanted to clear his name of Nixon's tarnish.

McConnell had been hired by a Kentucky law firm, but he found it dull. In Louisville, he became friends with the sister of the Deputy Attorney General, Laurence Silberman, and in 1976 he used the connection to get a job working for Silberman in D.C., as Deputy Assistant Attorney General. The experience appears to have influenced his thinking about money in politics and much else. He became an acolyte of Silberman and two other towering figures of conservative jurisprudence then at the Justice Department: Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia.

After Watergate, Congress had cracked down on political money by imposing strict limits on campaign contributions and spending, and created the Federal Election Commission to enforce the new laws. But conservatives, as well as a few liberal groups, including the A.C.L.U., began to litigate against the reforms. James Buckley, a conservative New York senator, challenged the spending limits as an infringement of his ability to pay for political communication, and thus a violation of his right to free speech.

The case, Buckley v. Valeo, went to the Supreme Court, and Buckley won. It marked the beginning of a forty-year, largely right-wing assault on efforts to keep private interests from corrupting American politics. Charles Koch, the arch-conservative billionaire oil refiner from Kansas, who was intent on using his fortune to seize control of American politics, was an early champion of the cause. McConnell adopted the "Money is speech" idea as his own, and eventually became the country's most relentless proponent of more money in politics. John Cheves, a reporter for the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, has described a class that McConnell taught in the seventies, at the University of Louisville. On a blackboard, he wrote down the three things he felt were necessary for success in politics: Money. Money. Money.

In 1977, McConnell ran for the position of Jefferson County judge/executive, the official overseeing the county that encompasses Louisville. A contemporary news account documents that, after announcing his candidacy, he promised to limit his campaign spending. But Mike Ward, who had elicited the pledge as the chair of Common Cause Kentucky, told me, "He snookered me." Ward says that he thought McConnell meant to limit spending throughout the campaign, but McConnell's promise applied only to the primary, in which he had no serious opponent. In the general election, he spent a record amount—and won.

Ward, a Democrat who was later elected to Congress, suggests that McConnell's first campaign was misleading in other ways. Unlike much of Kentucky, Louisville is a Democratic stronghold. "We're a moderate community, so to get elected he masqueraded as a progressive," Ward said. To win the endorsement of labor unions, McConnell pledged to support collective bargaining for public employees, an issue he dropped after taking office. Years later, he admitted to Dyche that he'd been "pandering." Abortion-rights groups believed that McConnell was on their side, but he claims that they were mistaken. Ever since then, he has called himself "pro-life," and has packed the courts with judges who oppose Roe v. Wade. According to two people who have been close to McConnell, he attends church but isn't especially religious, nor does he care about abortion; but, as one of the sources put it, he "will never take any position that could lose him an election."

The race for county judge/executive got ugly. McConnell's Democratic opponent, Todd Hollenbach, was then in the midst of a divorce, and Hollenbach told me that McConnell "made an issue of my family life." McConnell's spokesman denies this, but Dyche's biography describes McConnell "calling attention to his opponent's domestic life" with an ad describing himself as "a lucky guy" with "a great wife and two kids." Once McConnell was elected, according to two sources, he made a sexual advance toward one of his female employees. Although his spokesman says that this didn't happen, one of the sources told me, "It's the God's honest truth." Yet McConnell's first press secretary, Meme Runyon, praised him for hiring a number of young women, including her, and giving them career-making professional opportunities.

Three years after defeating Hollenbach, though, McConnell, amid accusations of infidelity, got divorced himself. He soon began searching for a new spouse. Keith Runyon, Meme's husband and a former editorial-page editor of the liberal Louisville *Courier-Journal*, vividly recalls him showing up at their house for dinner badly sunburned after a day of campaigning at a fish fry. McConnell, who has limited patience for such glad-handing, confided a plan. Runyon recalls him saying, "One of the things I've got to do is to marry a rich woman, like John Sherman Cooper did." Runyon added, "Boy, did he ever."

McConnell's spokesman disputes Runyon's account, but, in 1993, McConnell married Elaine Chao, an heiress, who is currently serving as Trump's Secretary of Transportation. McConnell devotes a chapter of his autobiography to "Love," describing how he and Chao, who emigrated from Taiwan as a child, are "kindred spirits." He explains, "We both knew the feeling of not fitting in, and had worked long and hard in order to prove ourselves." Chao graduated from Harvard Business School, ran the Peace Corps, served as President George W. Bush's Labor Secretary, and has been a director on such influential boards as those of Bloomberg Philanthropies and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. She also brought a sizable fortune into McConnell's life. Her father, James Chao, is the founder and chairman of the Foremost Group, a family-owned maritime shipping company, based in New York, which reportedly sends seventy per cent of its freight to China.

When McConnell presided over Trump's impeachment trial, in which the President was accused of trying to extort Ukrainian officials into helping him smear his political rival Joe Biden, he allowed Republican senators to keep insisting that the "real" Ukraine scandal was the Biden family's enrichment from their connections with the country's rulers. Yet McConnell must have known that virtually any criticism one could make about the Biden family could be made as well about the Chao family. In fact, such criticisms *had* been made in the book "Secret Empires," by the conservative writer Peter Schweizer. Republicans who promoted the book's accusations against the Biden family evidently skipped the adjoining chapter on McConnell and the Chao family.

As the *Times* has documented, McConnell and his in-laws have benefitted from unusual connections in Beijing. One of James Chao's schoolmates was Jiang Zemin, who later became China's President. According to the paper, James took a stake in a state-run company closely associated with Jiang. James and his daughter Angela, the chairman and C.E.O. of the family business, have also been on the boards of directors of some of China's most powerful state-run businesses, including the Bank of China. Moreover, both Angela and her father have been on the board of a holding company that oversees China State Shipbuilding, which builds warships for the Chinese military. Angela Chao told the *Times*, "I'm an American," and suggested that nobody would question the business "if I didn't have a Chinese face."

McConnell's marriage also made him

TOAD CIRCUS

The day after my toad circus the toads were all dead, crunchy and silent in their window well. I wanted to draw a doorway to walk through to get to the world of lilacs: purple, contagious green leaves and no movement but the steady invisible breathing of flowers. I knew I had to tell someone what I had done so I first walked to the park and stayed there until dusk, sitting on the glider or in the middle of the rusty and dangerous merry-go-round; I can't remember which. When it was nearly dark I walked home, certain that they were worried and maybe even out looking for me. When I got there I saw them busy in the kitchen through the window, so I hid in the back yard until it was good and dark, a living thing on a swing set in the gloom, the attic in my head cracking open for the first time and I went in.

—*Julia Story*

kin to some of the most influential businessmen in America. Angela Chao was married to the investment banker Bruce Wasserstein, who died in 2009, and she's now married to Jim Breyer, a billionaire venture capitalist with huge financial interests in China. In 2016, Breyer joined the board of directors of Blackstone, giving McConnell a brother-in-law at a company that financially supports his campaigns, and that manages more than half a trillion dollars.

Chao family members were campaign donors of McConnell's even before his marriage to Elaine. According to the *Times*, over the years the family has given more than a million dollars to McConnell's campaigns or PACs tied to him. Furthermore, disclosure forms show that, after Elaine Chao's mother died, in 2007, the family gave her and McConnell as much as twenty-five million dollars, making McConnell one of the Senate's wealthiest members.

It can be a danger for affluent Washington insiders to appear out of touch, and Kentucky is one of America's poorest states. McConnell and members of his staff have berated the home-town paper for running a photograph of him in a tuxedo. McConnell owns a modest house in Louisville, and at home he makes a habit of doing everyday errands himself, such as shopping for groceries at a nearby Kroger. He attends local college sports events with a few old friends; they wear headphones, to follow the plays on the radio, and high-five one another when their team scores. Chao has been less vigilant about playing down her wealth. When she directed the Peace Corps, she stirred talk by arriving at work in a chauffeured car. At the Labor Department, the *Times* reported, she "employed a 'Veep'-like staff member who carried around her bag." A luxury beauty-and-fitness purveyor in Washington told me that she couldn't get her staff to continue providing services for Chao after Chao knocked a makeup brush out of a beautician's hand during one appointment and threw a brush on the floor during another. Kentucky Democrats have tried to make an issue of the couple's wealth. Outside of Berea, a billboard featuring a giant photograph of McConnell and Chao is accompanied by the words "We're rich. How y'all doin?"

From the earliest days of McConnell's political life, he has had questionable relationships with moneyed backers. His salary as county judge/executive was meagre, and, in an arrangement that troubled some in the community, a group of undisclosed Louisville business leaders quietly threw in extra pay, ostensibly for his giving speeches. David Ross Stevens, who briefly served as McConnell's special assistant, told me, "It was like the big boys got together and gave him a pool of money." Stevens said of McConnell, "He was the most shallow person in politics that I'd ever met. At our first staff meeting, McConnell said, 'Does anyone have a project for me? I haven't been on TV for eleven days.' He was very clever, but it was all about 'What's this going to do for me?'" Stevens quit in disgust.

Two years into McConnell's tenure as county judge/executive, the *Courier-Journal* ran a story chronicling other turnover on his staff. Employees griped, anonymously, that McConnell was "extraordinarily selfish" and surrounded himself only with "yes men." They also complained of being pressured to commit to donating their kidneys, because McConnell was chairing a National Kidney Foundation fund-raising drive. McConnell denied that his office had poor morale—and two staffers who defended him in the article continued to work with him for decades. In the Senate, he is known for cultivating a smart and loyal staff, and for maintaining a formidable network of political allies, in Washington and in Kentucky. James Carroll, the former Washington correspondent for the *Courier-Journal*, told me, "It's a version of patronage—when you leave his office, he helps you in your career. Because of that loyalty, he has a vast network of eyes and ears. There are Mitch McConnell galaxies and solar systems." One former Senate colleague of his, Chris Dodd, a Democrat from Connecticut, told me that McConnell is one of the only senators who also runs party politics back in his home state.

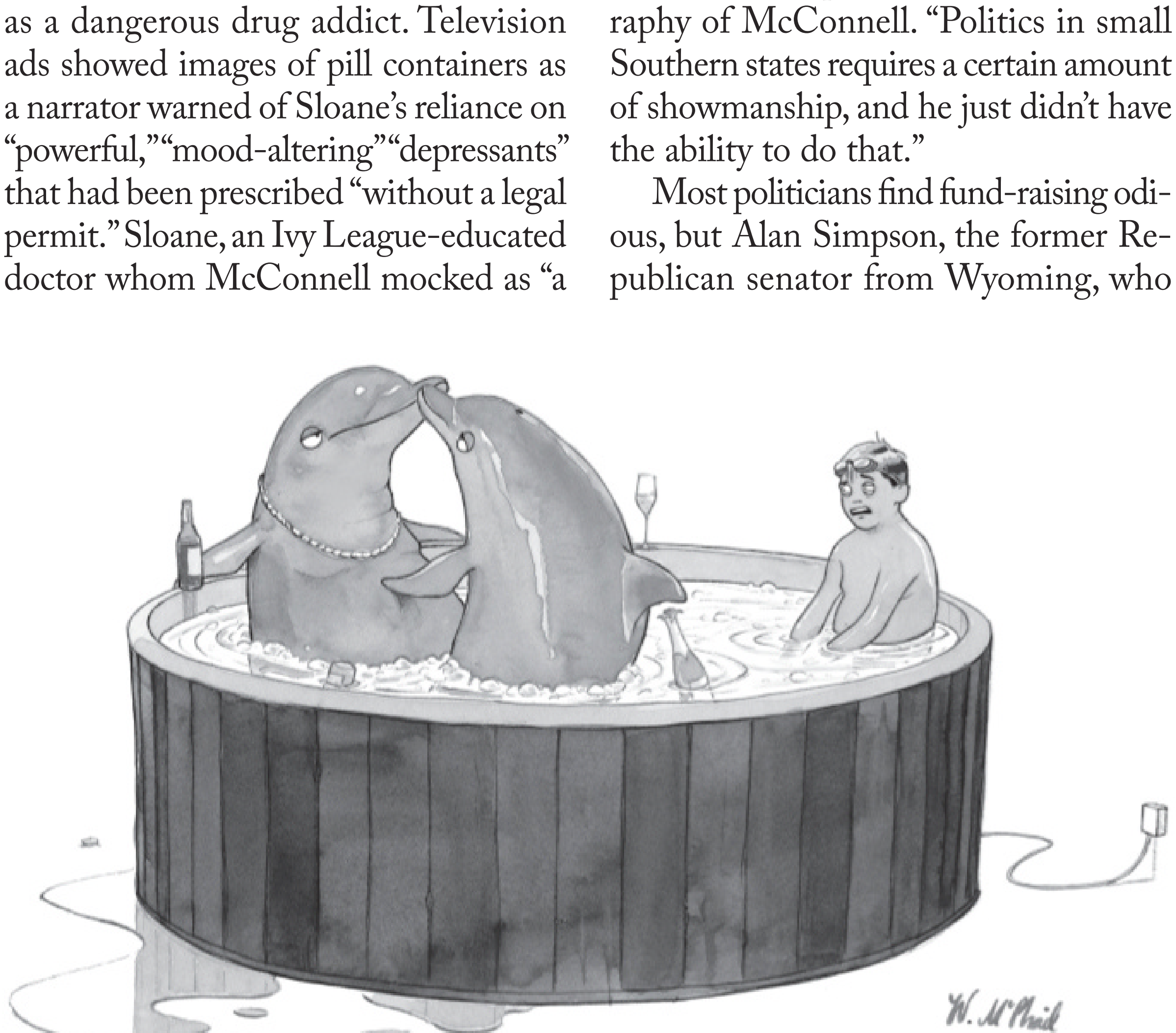
As McConnell gained power, Louisville's liberal élites, including the wealthy Bingham family, which owned the *Courier-Journal*, grew disenchanted. The paper had endorsed him as county judge/executive, and therefore felt some responsibility for having launched him. Runyon, the former editorial-page editor, said, "He managed to get our endorsement by being what we thought was a sincere reformer." Runyon recalled that in 2006, as Barry Bingham, Jr., the paper's publisher, lay dying, "he had a frank talk with me—he said, 'You know, Keith, the worst mistake we ever made was endorsing Mitch McConnell.'"

In 1984, McConnell ran for the Senate against the Democratic incumbent, Walter (Dee) Huddleston. McConnell later admitted that he'd begun planning his campaign the moment he'd been sworn in as county judge/executive. Nobody expected an unprepossessing, little-known local official to defeat Huddleston, but in the final weeks of the campaign McConnell surged to an upset victory, thanks, in large part, to a television ad created by Roger Ailes, the Nixon media adviser who later became the mastermind behind Fox News. Ailes was helped by Larry McCarthy, a virtuoso of negative campaign ads who later made the racially charged Willie Horton ad, attacking the 1988 Democratic candidate for President, Michael Dukakis. The McConnell ad depicted a pack of bloodhounds frantically hunting for Huddleston, ostensibly because he'd missed so many Senate votes while off giving paid speeches. It was funny, but Huddleston's attendance record, ninety-four per cent, wasn't out of the ordinary, and his speeches violated no Senate rules. Yet, as McCarthy proudly told the Washington *Post*, "It was like tossing a match on a pool of gasoline." That year, McConnell was the only Republican who defeated an incumbent Democratic senator. Two years after criticizing Huddleston's outside speaking fees, McConnell went on a lucrative eleven-day speaking tour of the West Coast. (McConnell's spokesman says, "The Leader never missed a vote.")

In 1990, Ailes helped McConnell paint his Democratic challenger, Harvey Sloane, as a dangerous drug addict. Television ads showed images of pill containers as a narrator warned of Sloane's reliance on "powerful," "mood-altering" "depressants" that had been prescribed "without a legal permit." Sloane, an Ivy League-educated doctor whom McConnell mocked as "a wimp from the East," had gone to Kentucky through a federal program that provides medical services to the rural poor, and went on to become Louisville's mayor. During the Senate campaign, Sloane, who had postponed a hip replacement until after the election, renewed a prescription for sleeping pills although his license had expired. It was a real lapse in judgment, but he didn't have a drug problem. Sloane said of McConnell's attack, "It was craven. He's just a conniving guy. He's the Machiavelli of the twenty-first century." McConnell himself has summarized his approach to campaigns simply: "If they throw a stone at you, you drop a boulder on them."

Television airtime and top media consultants aren't cheap. McConnell's Senate campaigns further convinced him that his old op-ed opposing political money was wrongheaded. "I never would have been able to win my race if there had been a limit on the amount of money I could raise and spend," he writes in his autobiography. Larry Forgy, a Kentucky Republican who fell out with McConnell, said that this was certainly true. "He knows without a definite advantage in money, he's not going anywhere in politics," Forgy said, in "The Cynic," Alec MacGillis's deeply researched 2014 biography of McConnell. "Politics in small Southern states requires a certain amount of showmanship, and he just didn't have the ability to do that."

Most politicians find fund-raising odious, but Alan Simpson, the former Republican senator from Wyoming, who served a dozen years with McConnell, told MacGillis that fund-raising was "a joy to him," adding, "He gets a twinkle in his eye and his step quickens. I mean, he loves it." McConnell's donors have found themselves rewarded. Kelly Craft, the wife of Joe Craft, one of McConnell's major backers—a coal magnate and the president of Alliance Resource Partners—currently serves as Ambassador to the U.N., after serving earlier in the Trump Administration as Ambassador to Canada. The U.N. appointment, especially, drew criticism, because her only expertise was fund-raising. A Kentuckian acquainted with the Crafts noted that the U.N. seat was once filled by such titans as Adlai Stevenson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "It's just incredible," he says.



"Guys, this isn't what I thought swimming with dolphins would be like."

According to "60 Minutes," McConnell and Chao helped another coal company skirt responsibility for one of the biggest environmental disasters in U.S. history. In 2000, Jack Spadaro, an engineer for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, began conducting an investigation in Martin County, Kentucky, after a slurry pond owned by Massey Energy burst open, releasing three hundred million gallons of lavalike coal waste that killed more than a million fish and contaminated the water systems of nearly thirty thousand people. Spadaro and his team were working on a report that documented eight apparent violations of the law, which could have led to charges of criminal negligence and cost Massey hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines. But, that November, George W. Bush was elected President, and he soon named Chao his Labor Secretary, giving her authority over the Mine Safety and Health Administration. She chose McConnell's former chief of staff, Steven Law, as her chief of staff. Spadaro told me, "Law had his finger in everything, and was truly running the Labor Department. He was Mitch's guy." The day Bush was sworn in, Spadaro was ordered to halt his investigation. Before the Labor Department issued any fines, Massey made a hundred-thousand-dollar donation to the National Republican Senatorial Committee. McConnell himself had run the unit, which raises funds for Senate campaigns, between 1997 and 2000.

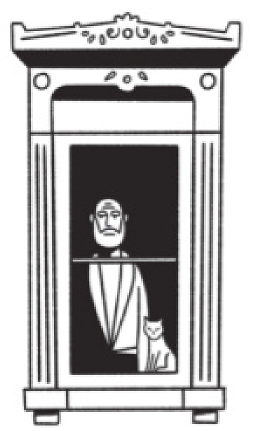
Massey ended up paying only fifty-six hundred dollars in federal fines. Law went on to run a cluster of outside money groups, including the Senate Leadership Fund, One Nation, American Crossroads, and Crossroads GPS, which have collectively given millions of dollars to the Senate campaigns of McConnell and other Republicans.

A spokesman for Chao says that the department levied many more fines on coal mines during her tenure, and that "she was always concerned about coal miners' jobs as well as their health and safety." But Spadaro told me he has no doubt that McConnell "made sure the report was essentially suppressed." He noted, "Massey gave a lot of money to McConnell over the years. McConnell's very bright. He took the money and, in return, protected the coal industry. He's truly the most corrupt politician in the U.S." Records show that, between 1990 and 2010, McConnell was the recipient of the second-largest amount of federal campaign donations from people and PACs associated with Massey. And when McConnell ran the National Republican Senatorial Committee it took in five hundred and eighty-four thousand dollars from the coal industry.

Nina McCoy, a retired teacher who lives in Martin County, told me, "Our own senator's wife basically shut down the investigation. Our community from then on knew all those people protected the coal companies instead of us."

According to the Lexington *Herald-Leader*, in 2002, Bob Murray, the C.E.O. of another coal company, Murray Energy, shouted down a Mine Safety and Health Administration inspector in a meeting by observing, "Mitch McConnell calls me one of the five finest men in America, and the last I checked he was sleeping with your boss." Both Murray and McConnell disputed the report, which was based on interviews and notes from the meeting. Records showed that Murray and his company's PAC had donated repeatedly to McConnell's campaigns.

Two decades since the Massey slurry-pond disaster, the coal industry has collapsed, barely employing five thousand people statewide, but the region's water remains tainted. McConnell takes credit for recently delivering several million dollars in federal funds to the area for water-infrastructure improvements, but William Brandon Halcomb, a property manager who lives there, told me that the situation is still "horrible." Shortly before we spoke, there had been no water for three weeks. He keeps a bucket tied to a bridge, which he lowers into the creek below when he needs water to flush a toilet. He must drive to another county to buy clean water. "You get a gallon, heat it on the stove, and take a trucker's bath," he said. "A wash-off is all you can do." As COVID-19 spreads, the health hazards posed to Americans who can't reliably wash their hands are obvious.



Martin County is overwhelmingly Republican and pro-Trump, and many residents see no connection between their problems and Washington. Gary Ball, the editor of the *Mountain Citizen*, a local newspaper, told me, "It's not McConnell's fault that our water is in bad shape." Ball, a former coal miner who strongly backs Trump, blames local Democratic officials for "years of mismanagement." Cara Stewart, the chief of staff for the Kentucky House Democrats, unsurprisingly sees it differently. "Why does Kentucky not have clean, reliable water?" she said. "McConnell could help, but he's in bed with the companies that are causing the problems."

As a backbench senator, McConnell used his fund-raising talents to rise in the Party's leadership—a path laid out by Lyndon Johnson. Robert A. Caro, the author of a magisterial four-volume biography of Johnson, told me that, "in a stroke of genius," Johnson, as a Democratic junior congressman, "realizes he has no power, but he has something no other congressman has—the oilmen and big contractors in Texas who need favors in Washington." By establishing control over the distribution of the donors' money, Johnson acquired immense power over his peers. McConnell was no fan of L.B.J., however. He has described his Presidential vote for Johnson as the one he regrets most, because he so deplored Johnson's expansion of government to fight the war on poverty—an effort launched in Martin County. In his memoir, McConnell argues that "poverty won," proving "Washington's overconfidence in its own ability to systematically solve complex social problems." (Having just passed the largest public-spending program in American history, McConnell and other Republicans are scrambling to justify the about-face, with some calling the new programs "restitution" rather than welfare.)

According to Keith Runyon, McConnell was focussed on his political survival from the moment he arrived in Washington. He recalls that, the morning after McConnell was first sworn in to the Senate, McConnell told him that he would be moving to the right from then on, to keep getting reëlected. McConnell has denied saying so, but Runyon told me, "He is a flat-out liar." Another acquaintance who has known McConnell for years said that, "to the extent that he's conversational, he wore his ambition to become Majority Leader on his sleeve."

McConnell envied better-known colleagues who were chased down the corridors by news reporters. He wanted to be like them, he later told Carl Hulse, a *Times* correspondent, who interviewed McConnell for his book "Confirmation Bias," about fights over Supreme Court nominees. The way McConnell ended up making his name was decidedly unglamorous: blocking campaign-finance reform. Even he derided the subject as rivalling "static cling as an issue most Americans care about." Dull as campaign financing was, it was vitally important to his peers, and to democracy. Few members wanted to risk appearing corrupt, and so they were grateful to McConnell for fighting one reform after the next—while claiming that it was purely about defending the First Amendment. According to MacGillis, behind closed doors McConnell admitted to his Senate colleagues that undoing the reforms was "in the best interest of Republicans." Armed with funding from such billionaire conservatives as the DeVos family, McConnell helped take the quest to kill restraints on spending all the way to the Supreme Court. In 2010, his side won: the Citizens United decision opened the way for corporations, big donors, and secretive nonprofits to pour unlimited and often untraceable cash into elections.

"McConnell loves money, and abhors any controls on it," Fred Wertheimer, the president of Democracy 21, a group that supports campaign-finance reform, said. "Money is the central theme of his career. And, if you want to control Congress, the best way is to control the money."

Between 1984, when McConnell was first elected to the Senate, and today, the amount of money spent on federal campaigns has increased at least sixfold, excluding outside spending, more and more of which comes from very rich donors. Influence-peddling has grown from a grubby, shameful business into a multibillion-dollar, high-paying industry. McConnell has led the way in empowering those private interests, and in aligning the Republican Party with them. His staff embodied "the revolving door," as they went from working for one of America's poorest states to lobbying for America's richest corporations, while growing rich themselves and helping fund McConnell's campaigns. Money from the coal industry, tobacco companies, Big Pharma, Wall Street, the Chamber of Commerce, and many other interests flowed into Republican coffers while McConnell blocked federal actions that those interests opposed: climate-change legislation, affordable health care, gun control, and efforts to curb economic inequality.

McConnell, like L.B.J., used fund-raising to help allies and punish enemies. "What he's done behind the scenes is apply the thing that speaks louder in Washington, D.C., than anything else—money," Wilson, the former Republican consultant, said. "Suddenly, Susan Collins gets a bridge in Maine. Lisa Murkowski suddenly gets a harbor. Oh, what a coincidence!" McConnell has a brilliant grasp of his caucus members' needs, and he helps them protect their seats with tens of millions of dollars in campaign donations and federal grants, some of which come through Chao's Department of Transportation. (A department spokesman says that there is no political linkage, and that every state gets some money.) McConnell also lets his caucus members take the spotlight, and, when he can, he allows them to skip votes that will be unpopular with their constituents. In private, McConnell can be bitingly funny, as well as sentimental—he has been known to tear up over an aide's departure—but he is shrewdly guarded, reportedly subscribing to the maxim "You can't get in trouble for what you don't say." He takes care to cover his tracks, putting private notes in his pocket rather than tossing them into Senate wastebaskets. And he protects his allies. In 2013, McConnell's lieutenants—who are known as Team Mitch—established a policy of blackballing anyone who works against an incumbent member of his caucus. Recently, in a Georgia Senate race, consultants working for the Republican congressman Doug Collins were warned that they would be frozen out for helping him challenge Kelly Loeffler, the incumbent, who is McConnell's choice in the primary, despite recent accusations against her of insider trading. (Loeffler denies wrongdoing.) Insubordination can result in what a former Trump White House official calls the Death Penalty: the President is told that the miscreant will not be confirmed by the Senate for any Administration job.

McConnell's iron control has won praise from other Republicans. Chris Christie, the former governor of New Jersey, told me, "He's the most talented Majority Leader since Lyndon Johnson. He knows how to count the votes, when to push, and when to pull. He's a real technician who knows the rules and knows his caucus."

Caro said, "In a way, McConnell and Johnson are very similar. They both used the rules and procedures of the Senate with great deftness. But, in a more significant way, they couldn't be more diametrically opposite. Johnson, for all his faults, in his later years used the rules and procedures to turn the Senate into a force to create social justice. McConnell has used them to block it."

Under McConnell's leadership, as the Washington *Post's* Paul Kane wrote recently, the chamber that calls itself the world's greatest deliberative body has become, "by almost every measure," the "least deliberative in the modern era." In 2019, it voted on legislation only a hundred and eight times. In 1999, by contrast, the Senate had three hundred and fifty such votes, and helped pass a hundred and seventy new laws. At the end of 2019, more than two hundred and seventy-five bills, passed by the House of Representatives with bipartisan support, were sitting dormant on McConnell's desk. Among them are bills mandating background checks on gun purchasers and lowering the cost of prescription drugs—ideas that are overwhelmingly popular with the public. But McConnell, currently the top recipient of Senate campaign contributions from the pharmaceutical industry, has denounced efforts to lower drug costs as "socialist price controls."

Longtime lawmakers in both parties say that the Senate is broken. In February, seventy former senators signed a bipartisan letter decrying the institution for not "fulfilling its constitutional duties." Dick Durbin, of Illinois, who has been in the Senate for twenty-four years and is now the second-in-command in the Democratic leadership, told me that, under McConnell, "the Senate has deteriorated to the point where there is no debate whatsoever—he's dismantled the Senate brick by brick." McConnell was the Minority Leader from 2006 to 2014. After Barack Obama was elected in 2008, McConnell used the filibuster to block a record number of bills and nominations supported by the Administration. As Majority Leader, he has control over the chamber's schedule, and he keeps bills and nominations he opposes from even coming up for consideration. "He's the traffic cop, and you can't get through the intersection without him," Durbin said.

Norman Ornstein, a political scientist specializing in congressional matters at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute, told me that he has known every Senate Majority Leader in the past fifty years, and that McConnell "will go down in history as one of the most significant people in destroying the fundamentals of our constitutional democracy." He continued, "There isn't anyone remotely close. There's nobody as corrupt, in terms of violating the norms of government."

The most famous example of McConnell's obstructionism was his audacious refusal to allow a hearing on Merrick Garland, whom Obama nominated for the Supreme Court, in 2016. When Justice Antonin Scalia unexpectedly died, vacating the seat, there were three hundred and forty-two days left in Obama's second term. But McConnell argued that "the American people" should decide who should fill the seat in the next election, ignoring the fact that the American people had elected Obama. As a young lawyer, McConnell had argued in an academic journal that politics should play no part in Supreme Court picks;

the only thing that mattered was if the nominee was professionally qualified. In 2016, though, he said it made no difference how qualified Garland, a highly respected moderate judge, was. Before then, the Senate had never declined to consider a nominee simply because it was an election year. On the contrary, the Senate had previously confirmed seventeen Supreme Court nominees during election years and rejected two. Nevertheless, McConnell prevailed.

He has since vowed to fill any Supreme Court vacancy that might open this year, no matter how close to the election it is. Indeed, according to a former Trump White House official, "McConnell's telling our donors that when R.B.G. meets her reward, even if it's October, we're getting our judge. He's saying it's our October Surprise."

McConnell has pointed to his obstruction of Garland with pride, saying, "The most important decision I've made in my political career was the decision not to do something." Many believe that, in 2016, the open Court seat motivated evangelical voters to overlook their doubts about Trump, providing the crucial bloc that won him the Presidency.

But McConnell's predecessor as Majority Leader, the retired Democratic senator Harry Reid, of Nevada, accuses McConnell of destroying norms that fostered comity and consensus, such as the restrained use of filibusters. Although the two leaders had at first managed to be friendly, bonding over their shared support for Washington's baseball team, the Nationals, they became bitter antagonists during the Obama Administration. "Mitch and the Republicans are doing all they can to make the Senate irrelevant," Reid told me. "We've watched them stand mute no matter what Trump does. They have lost their souls. From a policy perspective, it's awful. It's hurt the Senate and damaged the country."

The costs of the Senate's dysfunction stretch in all directions, and include America's vulnerability in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. For seven years after Obama's signature domestic achievement, the Affordable Care Act, passed, in 2010, Republicans in Congress tried at least sixty times to repeal it. In 2017, McConnell, who called it "the worst bill in modern history," led the charge again and, among other things, personally introduced a little-noticed amendment to eliminate the Prevention and Public Health Fund at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which provided grants to states for detecting and responding to infectious-disease outbreaks, among other things. The fund received approximately a billion dollars a year and constituted more than twelve per cent of the C.D.C.'s annual budget. Almost two-thirds of the money went to state and local health departments, including a program called Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases, in Kentucky.

Hundreds of health organizations, including the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology, sent a letter to McConnell and other congressional leaders, warning them of "dire consequences" if the Prevention Fund was eliminated. Public-health programs dealing with infectious-disease outbreaks had never been restored to the levels they were at before the 2008 crash and were "critically underfunded." The letter concluded, "Eliminating the Prevention Fund would be disastrous."

In a column in *Forbes*, Judy Stone, an infectious-disease specialist, asked, "Worried about bird flu coming from Asia? Ebola? Zika? You damn well should be. Monitoring and control will be slashed by the Senate proposal and outbreaks of illness (infectious and other) will undoubtedly worsen." The cuts, she wrote, were "unconscionable—particularly given that the savings will go to tax cuts for the wealthiest rather than meeting the basic health needs of the public."

On July 28, 2017, a dramatic thumbs-down vote by Senator John McCain stopped Senate Republicans from eliminating the entire Affordable Care Act, including money for the Prevention Fund. McConnell and other Republicans subsequently tried again to gut the C.D.C. fund. Much of the funding survived, although some of it was later shifted, with bipartisan support, to cancer research and other activities. McConnell's attempt to kill the fund was just a small piece of the Republicans' much larger undermining of Obamacare. According to Jeff Levi, a professor of public health at George Washington University, one result of the Republicans' efforts is that many Americans who lack insurance "will likely avoid getting tested and treated for COVID-19, because they fear the costs."

McConnell's opposition to Obama

OH, GOD, I'M TURNING INTO MY MOTHER.
LFINCK

"He's always, like, 'Oh, really? I went to school in Canis Major—well, not in Canis Major, but just outside Canis Major,' and it's, like, we get it, you went to Blarvard."

was relentless. In 2010, the Senate Majority Leader famously said, when asked about his goals, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term President." Carroll, the *Courier-Journal* reporter, was dumbstruck by McConnell's attitude when the Senator allowed him to listen in one day as he took a phone call from Obama, on the condition that Carroll not write about it. "McConnell said a couple of words, like 'Yup,' 'O.K.,' and 'Bye,' but he never said, 'Mr. President,'" Carroll recalls. "There was just a total lack of respect even for the office." McConnell preferred to deal with Obama's Vice-President, Joe Biden. (In his autobiography, McConnell mocks Biden's "incessant chatter" but also says, "We could talk to each other.")

McConnell's disrespect for Obama mirrored the views of rich conservative corporate donors like the Kochs, who underwrote many of the campaigns that enabled Republicans to capture the majority in the House of Representatives in 2010, and in the Senate four years later. In the 2014 midterm elections alone, the Koch donor network, which has a few hundred members, spent more than a hundred million dollars. In 2014, shortly before Republicans took the Senate, McConnell appeared as an honored guest at one of the Kochs' semi-annual fund-raising summits. He thanked "Charles and David," adding, "I don't know where we would be without you." Soon after he was sworn in as the Senate Majority Leader, he hired a former lobbyist for Koch Industries as his policy chief. McConnell then took aim at the Kochs' longtime foe the Environmental Protection Agency, urging governors to disobey new restrictions on greenhouse gases.

Eager though McConnell was to see the end of the Obama era, he wasn't enthused about Trump's candidacy. To the extent that McConnell had any fixed ideology, he was an old-fashioned deficit hawk who favored big business, free trade, and small government—the opposite of Trump's populist pitch.

Trump's anti-Washington supporters weren't enthused about McConnell, either. They booed him when he briefly appeared onstage at the Republican National Convention. But McConnell—having watched Senate colleagues from the Republican establishment, including Bob Bennett, of Utah, and Dick Lugar, of Indiana, get toppled by Tea Party insurgents—knew that it was dangerous to cross his party's base.

In the closing weeks of the campaign, McConnell gave more assistance to Trump than many knew. In the summer of 2016, while the Senate was in recess, Obama's C.I.A. director, John Brennan, tried to contact McConnell about an urgent threat to national security. The agency had strong evidence that President Vladimir Putin of Russia was trying to interfere in the U.S. election, possibly to hinder Hillary Clinton and help Trump. But, for "four or five weeks," a former White House national-security official told me, McConnell deflected Brennan's requests to brief him. Susan Rice, Obama's former national-security adviser, said, "It's just crazy." McConnell had told Brennan that "he wouldn't be available until Labor Day."

When the men finally spoke, McConnell expressed skepticism about the intelligence. He later warned officials "not to get involved" in elections, telling them that "they were touching something very dangerous," the former national-security official recounted. If Obama spoke out publicly about Russia, McConnell threatened, he would label it a partisan political move, knowing that Obama was determined to avoid that.

As the intelligence community grew increasingly convinced that Russia had engaged in cyber sabotage, Obama struggled to get bipartisan support from the top four congressional leaders: McConnell; Paul Ryan, then the Republican Speaker of the House; Nancy Pelosi, then the ranking Democrat in the House; and Harry Reid, then the Senate Minority Leader. Finally, after Labor Day, Obama convened an Oval Office meeting during which he urged the four leaders to put out a joint statement alerting election officials across the country to the extraordinary foreign threat. According to Denis McDonough, Obama's former chief of staff, Ryan, Pelosi, and Reid agreed to work together, but "McConnell said nothing." The former official said, "It took weeks to get the letter."

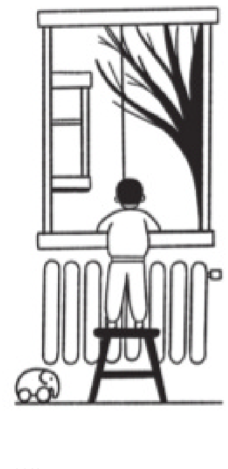
A previously unseen log of the private correspondence among the four leaders' staffs shows that McConnell edited the draft, refusing to accept any of the others' proposed changes. He was dead set against designating U.S. voting systems as "critical infrastructure" or urging election officials to seek assistance from the Department of Homeland Security. Instead, he insisted on leaving election security entirely to non-federal officials. The final statement was so muddled that a Reid aide argued, "FWIW, I'd rather do no letter at all." Another Reid aide replied, "Me, too. But we apparently have no choice." Finally, on September 28th, the others signed off on the McConnell draft. Instead of identifying Russia, or a foreign threat, it merely mentioned "malefactors" seeking to "disrupt the administration of our elections." It was so indecipherable that neither the public nor election officials learned until well after the election that Russia had targeted voting systems in all fifty states. Reid told me, "The letter was nothing like what Obama wanted. It was very, very weak."

"I don't know for sure why he did it," Rice said. "But my guess, particularly with the benefit of hindsight, is that he thought" calling out Russia "would be detrimental to Trump—so he delayed and deflected. It's disgraceful." Rice noted that after the election McConnell continued to resist numerous bipartisan calls to safeguard election security. Only after critics began mocking him as Moscow Mitch did he finally agree, last September, to support major expenditures on it. The nickname provoked the usually unflappable McConnell; he issued a response denouncing it as "McCarthyism."

McConnell has admitted that he was as shocked as anyone the night that Trump won. But he recovered quickly, and made an unusual demand. According to one Trump transition adviser, he "promoted" his wife for Transportation Secretary, arguing that in previous Administrations she had been the department's deputy secretary, as well as the chair of the Federal Maritime Commission. "We thought she would want the Labor Department," the adviser said, since she had run it during the Bush years. "It was a surprise." It also raised conflict-of-interest questions, given her family's shipping business. "Why would she want Transportation?" the adviser said, sardonically. "She has no business in transportation, right?" But, the adviser said, the advantage of having McConnell literally in bed with the Trump Administration was obvious to all.

Chao is among the more qualified of Trump's Cabinet officers, but she has been accused of favoring her husband's interests—a charge that she has denied. Politico reported that a former McConnell campaign staffer working for Chao gave extra help to Kentucky grant applicants, triggering an internal investigation, which is ongoing. Unabashed, McConnell turned the accusations into a campaign ad, boasting of his ability to bring transportation projects back to Kentucky. John Hudak, a Brookings Institution expert on government spending, and the author of "Presidential Pork," told me, "Maybe he's taking his cues from the President. If profiting from the operations of government doesn't matter to the President, it likely won't matter to a Cabinet secretary or Majority Leader."

For a brief time in 2017, McConnell showed some independence from Trump, and some conscience. He spoke out after the white-supremacist riot in Charlottesville. Although Chao stood by Trump's lectern as he claimed that there had been "fine people on both sides," McConnell issued a statement denouncing the "KKK and neo-nazi groups," adding that "their messages of hate and bigotry are not welcome in Kentucky, and should not be welcome anywhere in America." Around the same time, Trump disparaged McConnell on Twitter for the Senate's failure to overturn Obamacare, to which McConnell dismissively replied that the President, given his lack of political experience, perhaps had "excessive expectations."



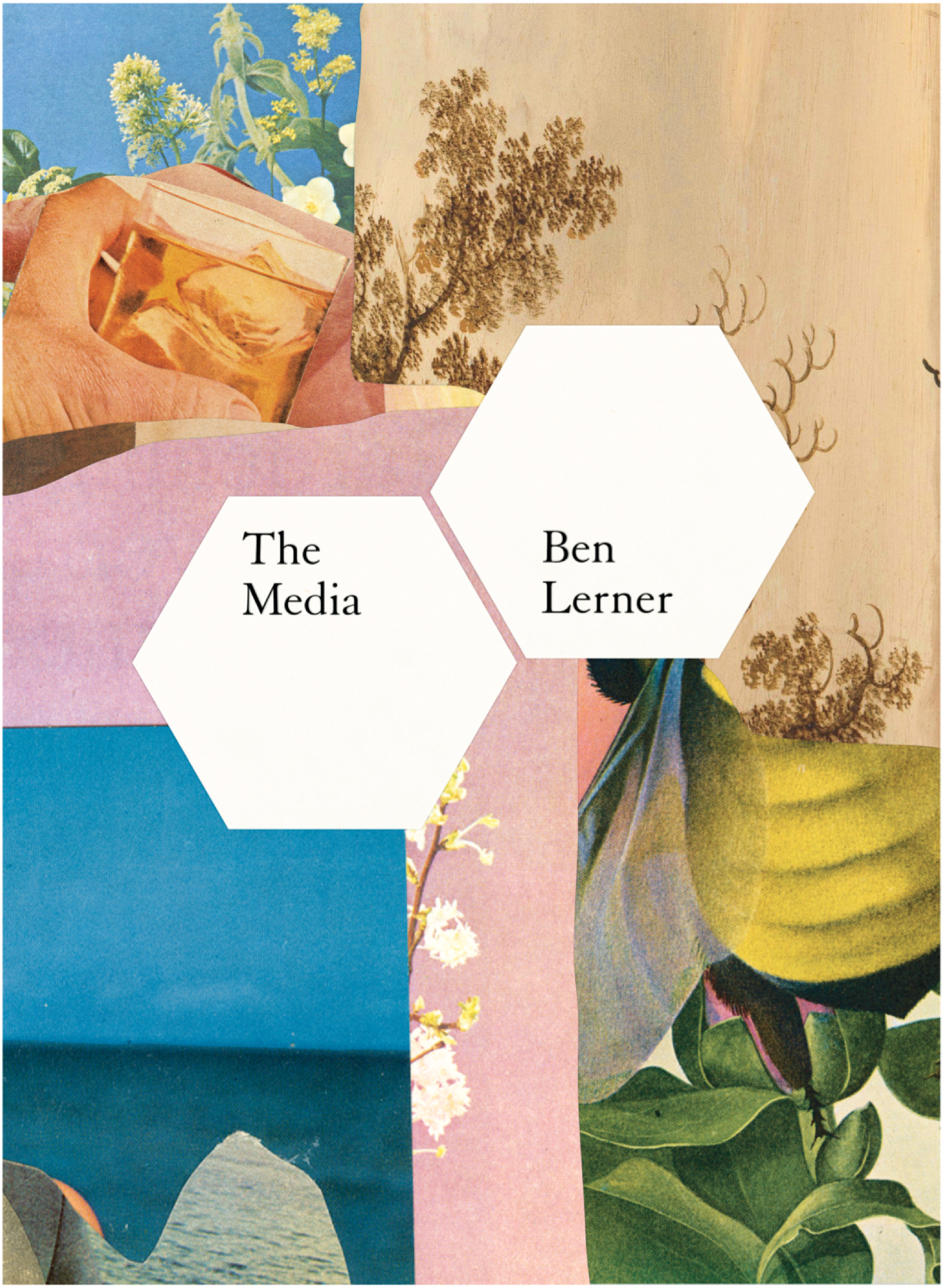
But, as they feuded, McConnell's popularity cratered in Kentucky. Dave Contarino, a Democratic operative in the state who opposes McConnell, was polling and doing focus groups, and he told me that the Senator's approval rating fell to seventeen per cent. His poll numbers didn't recover until mid-2018, when he defended Trump during the Kavanaugh confirmation fight. "It rescued him with conservatives, who said that finally he was acting like a Republican and supporting our President," Contarino said. McConnell's defense of Trump during the impeachment trial boosted him further at home. Gary Ball, the Martin County newspaper editor, told me, "People here love Trump. McConnell's not so popular. But we loved what McConnell did for Trump during impeachment."

In McConnell's reëlection race against McGrath, a former Marine fighter pilot, he has been trying to make Trump his virtual running mate. And now that McConnell has helped eliminate nearly all meaningful spending restraints, he can count on practically unlimited funds from billionaire donors. His campaign has already raised $25.6 million, although McGrath has raised even more. Matt Jones, a popular sports-radio host and the co-author of "Mitch, Please!," a scathing book about McConnell, said, "The quickest way for him to be beaten is to turn on Trump." Jones told me that he and his co-author had interviewed people in every one of Kentucky's hundred and twenty counties, and had found only one, an elderly farmer, who was a big McConnell fan. "McConnell's *hated* here," he told me. "And Trump is loved. He has no choice but to kiss Trump's ring."

Until recently, McConnell's enabling of Trump has worked well for him, if not for the country. But it has now made him complicit in a crisis whose end is nowhere in sight. As the consequences of the Trump Presidency become lethally clear, his deal looks costlier every day. The trusted Cook Political Report recently downgraded the chances that Republicans would hold their Senate majority to a fifty-fifty tossup, after conservative strategists reported widespread alarm over Trump's handling of the pandemic.

Rick Wilson, the former Republican consultant, holds out faint hope that, if McConnell and Trump are both reëlected, McConnell will finally stand up to the President. McConnell would be in his seventh, and likely last, Senate term. He's had triple-bypass heart surgery, and acquaintances say that his hearing is poor; last summer, he fell and fractured his shoulder. For the first time in his political career, he might no longer feel he has to act purely out of self-interest. "He could lead the resistance, and blow up the train tracks," Wilson said.

Dick Durbin has no such illusions. "I've seen how this movie ends too many times," he said, of McConnell and Trump. "They need each other too much." ♦



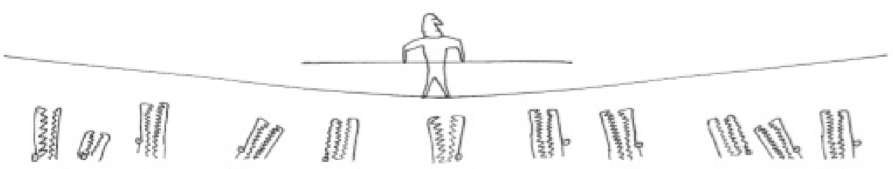
The Media

Ben Lerner

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

Walking at dusk through the long meadow, recording this prose poem on my phone, that’s my job, as old as soldiery, the hills, the soldered hills where current flows, green current. When you are finished recording, your lips are dried flowers. The trees are full of black plastic bags and hornets’ nests but not significance; the task of imbuing them falls to me. And it’s me, Ben, just calling to check in. I’m on the way to pick Marcela up from day care and just wanted to hear about your trip. I’m sure it must have been hard seeing him like that. Anyway, I love you and I’m here. Give me a call when you can. I’ll be around until the late nineteenth century, when carved wood gives way to polished steel, especially in lake surfaces. You know how you sometimes realize it has been raining only when it stops, silence falling on the roof, forming rivulets on the glass? This is the religious equivalent of that, especially in music and applied fields, long meadows. Overwintering queens make wonderful pets, just don’t expect them to understand your writing, how you’ve rearranged the stresses to sponsor feelings in advance of the collective subject who might feel them, good work if you can get it, and you can’t, nobody can, that’s why the discipline is in crisis, this cut-flower business, applied folds, false equivalence. I remember when I interviewed for this position. I was wearing a Regency trimmed velvet tailcoat with a small hole over the left breast where the lead ball had entered one of my great-grandfather’s five heartlike structures. I met the committee at a Hyatt. The room had migraine carpet; a conventional river scene hung above the bed. After the usual pleasantries, the chairperson requested that I sing, and soon the painted water began to flow. It’s hard to believe that was more than two hundred years ago, when people still got dressed up for air travel and children were expected to absorb light in their super-black feathers, making contour disappear. They probably evolved to startle predators, make us seem deep, so that, when they least expected it, we could cast their underground nests with molten aluminum, sell them online as sculpture. But if you’ve ever seen a dendritic pattern in a frozen pond, lightning captured in hard plastic, or the delicate venation of an insect’s wing (the fourth vein of the wing is called the media), then you’ve probably felt that a spirit is at work in the world, or was, and that making it visible is the artist’s task, or was. I am resolved to admire all elaborate silvery pathways, no matter where I find them, that’s why I’m calling. I’m sitting in Grand Army Plaza by the fountain, which they’ve shut off until the spring, when it will again give sensuous expression to our freedom. In other words, I’m at work, realigning and interlocking barbules, lubricating what are essentially dead structures with a fatty oil I’ve developed for that purpose, thinking of you, holding you in my thoughts like fireflies in glass, cold to the touch, green current. You just can’t blame yourself. The last time I saw him we had dinner in Fort Greene and he was cracking me up with his impressions, especially of John. He was drinking, but not too much: one cocktail, white wine. The only weird moment was when I had to look at my phone because I was getting a lot of texts and wanted to make sure everything was O.K. with the girls. He kind of freaked out about it: Am I boring you? Do you need to make a call? But I apologized and we moved on. What reassured me most was how excited he was about the new job, even if it didn’t pay much. They were going to let him use the 3-D printers for some of his own stuff and he was really psyched about that. Anyway, I love you and I’m here. I’ve got to get Marcela now but tonight I’m around, promoting syllables, trying to avoid the twin traps of mere procedure and sentimentalism, ingesting around seventeen milligrams, blunt-toothed leaves in motion lights, signifying nothing but holding a place. Lately my daughters have been asking what I do when they’re at school; I want to say that I enchant the ferryman with my playing so that lost pets may return, that the magnet tiles arrange themselves into complex hexagonal structures at my song, but they know I’m not the musical one, that I describe the music of others, capture it in hard plastic. With the profits, I purchase an entrapping foam that coats the nest for a complete kill and a pendant that resembles a tiny abacus of pearls, responsibly sourced. What does a normal day look like for you? For me, the fruit is undefined around the edges and the faces of some friends are mere suggestions while others observe the standard codes of verisimilitude in a way that feels increasingly affected; why appear vividly when it’s dusk, has been dusk for ages? I don’t know if oysters can feel pain, can’t even know if other humans do, although I recognize what philosophers call “pain behavior” among my loved ones as the seasons change. Tie their stems together with unflavored dental floss and hang them upside down, but display them away from windows or they’ll fade, polished steel gives way to painted water, a turn of phase, a change of phrase, the slippages release small energy and the harvest falls to me. Someday I’d like to bring my daughters to work, but not today. Today is cut-glass flowers reinforced internally with wire, a vibration-control system, the religious equivalent of that, lampwork they’re too young to understand, the effects too mild. Their nests are paper, they can discriminate between fragments of foreign and natal comb, the interests between workers and their queen diverge, those are the three prerequisites for song, for the formation of singers who will eat both meat and nectar, which they feed to larvae on the bus ride home. Marcela pulls the yellow stop-request cord, but never hard enough, so you have to help without her knowing, say “Great job.” Say “Great job” to the sensible world if you want to encourage reënchantment, keep the trees in touch with their strengths, the magnolia’s increasing northern range, for instance, soon to be cold-hardy beyond zone four. The way we say of our children “they went down” to mean they fell asleep, that makes me glass, soft glass bending in long meadows, a fallacy each generation reinvents and disavows, reinvents and disavows, a rocking motion. Otherwise you’re mixing pills and gin and your friends are debating whether it constitutes a true attempt, recklessness, a cry for help, before deciding it makes no difference, it’s pain behavior, he has to be checked in, monitored, sponsored, set to music. Anyway, the girls are down and I can talk. I’m just clicking on things in bed, a review by a man named Baskin, who says I have no feelings and hate art. Through the blinds I can see the blue tip of the neighbor’s vape pen signalling in the dark, cold firefly. The raccoons are descending from their nests in foreclosed attics to roam the streets of Kensington; we moved last summer, have a guest room now, come visit. I can’t believe I haven’t seen you since his wedding. ♦

THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

CRISIS ROCK

The Strokes demonstrate their knack for good music in bad times.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

The first time the Strokes put out an album in the midst of a local and national crisis was on October 9, 2001. The U.S. release of their full-length début, "Is This It," had been delayed by 9/11, and the band had scrambled to excise "New York City Cops," a sneering indictment of the city's police force, from the CD. (It remained on the vinyl.) New York was grieving and dazed, but the Strokes seemed so emblematic of the city's excesses and allure that loving them felt nearly patriotic.

When "Is This It" was released, I was twenty-one, and in my first semester of an M.F.A. program. I worked as an editorial intern at *Spin* a couple of days a week, and spent most of my evenings drinking cheap beer and going to see bands at the Mercury Lounge, a small rock club on the Lower East Side. I wore threadbare vintage T-shirts and artfully disintegrating Chuck Taylors, and never went anywhere without a Manhattan Portage messenger bag and an enormous pair of headphones. I was young, broke, privileged, and oblivious; I believed that New York was the exact center of the universe. As such, I was almost too perfectly positioned to receive the Strokes as a kind of nihilist gospel. I worshipped the band instantly and thoroughly.

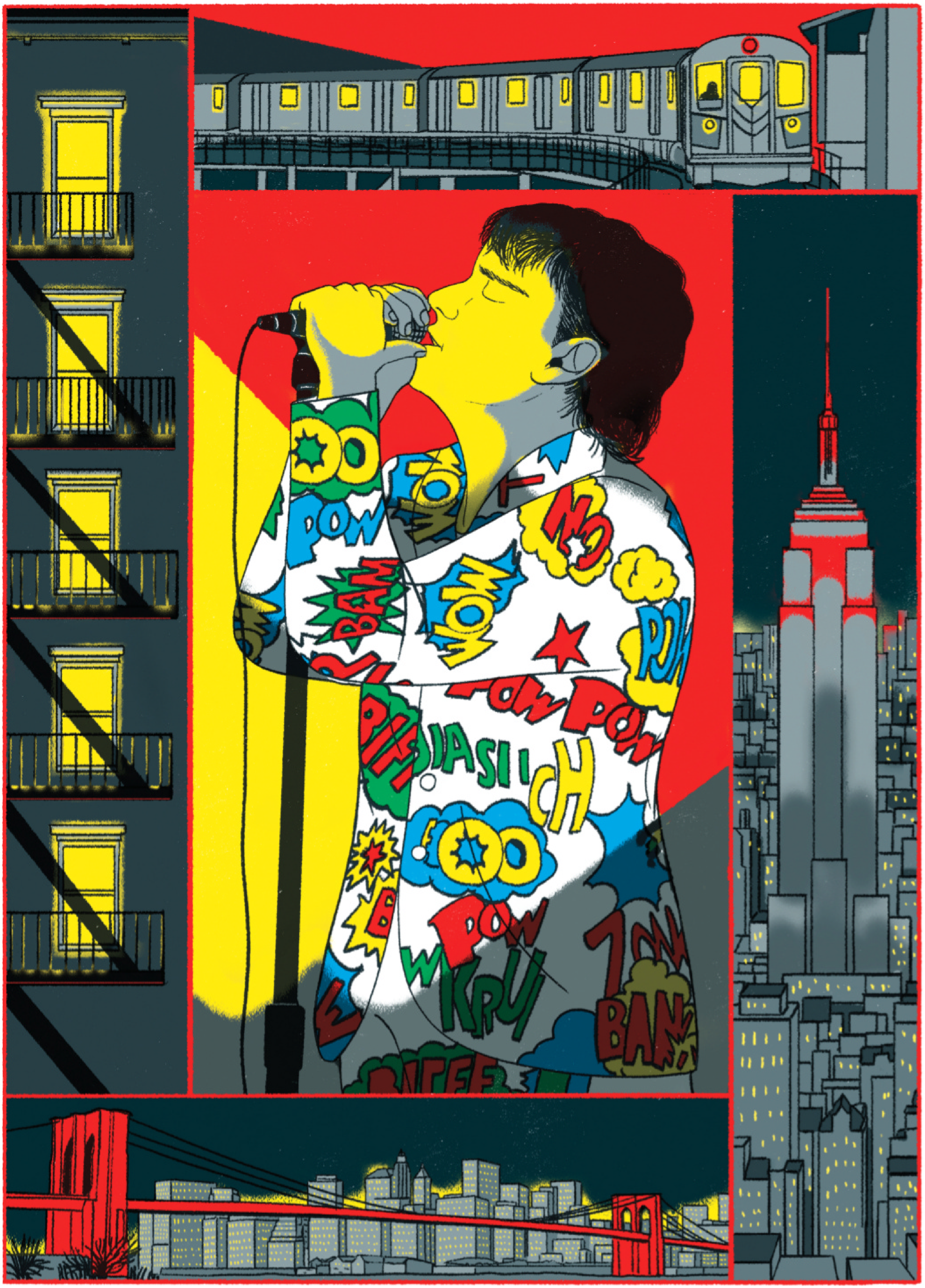
Musically, the Strokes weren't doing anything particularly innovative, and critics of the band excitedly pointed out how easy it was to find precedents for its anxious, hooky indie rock: the Velvet Underground, Television, the Stooges. But it had been a while since rock and roll had sounded so rangy and bored. In the late nineties, the genre had grown angry and hypermasculine. Bands such as Staind, Creed, and System of a Down, all of which had No. 1 records in 2001, were led by red-faced men who sang with almost unfathomable conviction. Julian Casablancas, the Strokes' handsome and vaguely bummed-out lead singer, was listless by comparison. He drank too much—sometimes he leaned on the microphone stand to steady himself—and his eyes were soft and doleful. "When we was young, oh man, did we have fun," Casablancas sang, on "Someday." Even at twenty-two, he was already over it.

Now, eighteen years later, as the city again attempts to steady itself, the Strokes have released "The New Abnormal," the band's sixth album and its first since 2013. The title is eerily prescient—a handy summation of how daily life in New York has changed since the start of the year. This is a lonesome and frightening time, and nostalgia is a heavy and intoxicating force. "The New Abnormal" sounds better to me than almost anything else I've listened to this spring. The album was produced by Rick Rubin, whose method consists mostly of stripping songs of extraneous or maudlin elements, compressing the audio, and pumping up the volume. Rubin can turn an ordinary song into a bullet. His practice of reduction and amplification doesn't work for every artist, but this distillation has made the Strokes sound only sharper and more potent. (The band was never really beloved for its subtlety.)

The Strokes first played "Bad Decisions," an early single from the album, in February, at a rally for Bernie Sanders in Durham, New Hampshire. (Many popular indie-rock acts, including Bon Iver and Vampire Weekend, have performed at events in support of the Sanders campaign; one of the great pre-pandemic joys was watching Sanders carefully consult his notes before yelling an artist's name.) "Bad Decisions" has all the elements of a classic Strokes single, including an overly familiar chorus. ("Last Nite," from "Is This It," featured a riff based on Tom Petty's "American Girl"; "Bad Decisions" resembles Billy Idol's "Dancing with Myself" enough that Idol and his writing partner, Tony James, were preëmptively given a songwriting credit.) "I'm making bad decisions / Really, really bad decisions," Casablancas sings, in the song's final chorus. Then he drags out a "Yeeeaaahhh!" in a way that sounds equal parts celebratory and despairing. He seems to understand that the effects of poor judgment can be both banal and devastating, and that our worst behavior is often deliberate and premeditated. Sometimes we know that we're doing something stupid, but we do it anyway. Acknowledging the paradox helps to neutralize the shame.

The Strokes' music makes everything feel less high-stakes. This might be why it sounds so good in an emergency. Nothing is ever so unbearable that it can't be shrugged off. People arrive and depart, relationships begin and fracture, things are lost, parties get boring—whatever. Casablancas's songs briefly make a person feel like she's just a little bit above it all, worn out in a

ABOVE: SERGE BLOCH


POW
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The Strokes' music makes everything feel less high-stakes. This might be why it sounds excellent in an emergency.

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTINA DAURA

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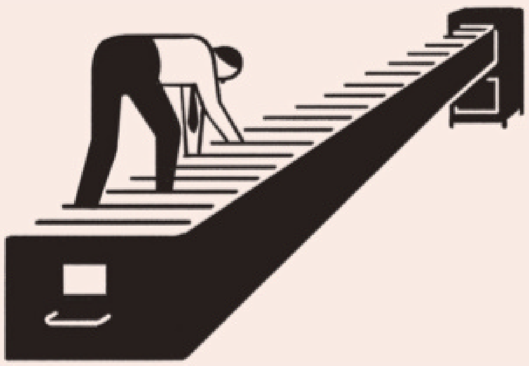

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THE NEW YORKER

sexy, oblique way, rather than in the usual gutted, ugly way. "The room is on fire as she's fixing her hair," Casablancas sang, on "Reptilia," a track from "Room on Fire," the follow-up to "Is This It."

Casablancas is forty-one now, a husband and a father, but he remains repulsed by melodrama and displays of sentimentality. Instead, he is a stealthily emotive singer—he often ends notes with a delicate little flourish, letting his voice become full and pretty, if only for a moment. He does this to incredible effect in "At the Door," a tense, spare song about cycles of self-flagellation. Its verses feature only Casablancas's voice and a synthesizer. He sings of blankly accepting whatever he's got coming:

> I can't escape it
> Never gonna make it
> Out of this in time
> I guess that's just fine.

For much of the twenty-tens, it seemed as if the Strokes might be done making records altogether. In interviews, the band members were often cagey about their interpersonal dynamics, though it was still widely understood that on their first three releases ("Room on Fire" was followed by "First Impressions of Earth," in 2006) Casablancas functioned as a sort of default creative director, writing all the lyrics and most of the music. When Casablancas's bandmates (the guitarists Albert Hammond, Jr., and Nick Valensi, the bassist Nikolai Fraiture, and the drummer Fabrizio Moretti) suggested that Casablancas consider a more collaborative approach to the work, he complied—but one got the sense that he did so with deep bitterness. The recording of "Angles," the band's fourth record, was fraught. Casablancas was supposedly absent for most of the sessions, recording his parts alone. "It was awful—just awful," Valensi later told Pitchfork. The band chose not to tour or to do any interviews or appearances to promote its next release, the jittery and unfocussed "Comedown Machine," from 2013.

Meanwhile, Casablancas quit drinking, moved upstate, and started a new band, the Voidz. He began writing different sorts of songs. "Human Sadness," a meandering, eleven-minute freak-out from the Voidz's album "Tyranny," seemed to speak to some long-simmering avant-garde aspirations. (Casablancas's vocals are mostly incomprehensible, and a scratchy guitar solo lasts a full minute.) If "Is This It" is analogous to the Velvet Underground's "Loaded," then "Tyranny" is Casablancas's "Metal Machine Music"—weird, gorgeously antagonistic, and expressly noncommercial.

It's interesting to wonder if the Strokes will appeal to listeners born in the years following "Is This It"—young people who are in thrall, perhaps, to some of what the Strokes inspired (the Arctic Monkeys, Ty Segall) but not necessarily to the band itself. "I'm not scared/Just don't care/I'm not listening, you hear?" Casablancas sings, on "Selfless." The sensation he's describing—a kind of purposeful disengagement—is familiar to anyone who came of age in the nineties, but apathy of this sort is largely anathema to Generation Z. Will the idea that life is too mortifying to be taken seriously compute for teen-agers who spend their spare time screaming themselves hoarse at climate protests? They have fought to hone and perpetuate a grammar of inclusivity, in which no one is made to feel insufficient, but so much of the pleasure of listening to the Strokes is in feeling as if you have arrived someplace exclusive, where heartache doesn't quite register.

Yet Casablancas is not apolitical; he has spoken often and at length about his own distrust of capitalist systems, despite being a product of them. (His father is John Casablancas, the founder of Elite Model Management; his mother is a former Miss Denmark; and he grew up attending various boarding and private schools.) In a 2018 appearance on "The Late Late Show with James Corden," Casablancas wore a militaristic black cargo vest. As Corden gamely attempted to stuff its pockets with orange slices, Casablancas issued a warning: "We're in an invisible war, my friend. Gotta be ready." Perhaps there is an emotional tipping point where caring too much begins to look like not caring at all. The Strokes might know it better than any other band. ♦

THE CUTTING EDGE

As surgeons implant more and more devices in us, who is looking after our safety?

BY JEROME GROOPMAN

"A chance to cut is a chance to cure": I first heard this maxim forty-five years ago, as a medical student, when I watched a surgeon extract a tumor from a woman's abdomen. Confidence in the powers of surgery extends back to the most ancient roots of the field. There are Neolithic skulls dating from 6500 B.C. with holes that testify to trepanation, a treatment that involved drilling through the cranium, presumably to let out malign spirits. (The practice remained somewhat common until the end of the Middle Ages.) The teachings traditionally ascribed to the Indian physician Sushruta, who probably lived around the sixth century B.C., describe a cataract operation, in which a kind of curved needle was used to displace the occlusion from the line of sight, and rhinoplasties, in which the nose was remodelled using leaf-shaped flaps of skin cut from the forehead.

For much of Western history, however, surgery lay somewhat apart from the practice of medicine. Hippocrates was leery of it, writing, "He who wishes to be a surgeon should go to war"; the crude practices of the battlefield were, as Roy Porter put it in his classic history of medicine, "Blood and Guts" (2002), "the work of hand not head." This suspicion bred an enduring medical division of labor, in which many healers viewed surgery as inferior. Well into the modern era, surgical procedures were the province of the barber, along with pulling teeth.

Unlike drugs, medical implants are not required to be tested in clinical trials.

But in the eighteenth century the discipline made its first steps on a journey toward respectability, eminence, and, eventually, even glamour. This progress was accelerated by a number of developments. The Enlightenment placed scientific method at the heart of medicine, clearing away theories about the body that had changed little since the time of Hippocrates. Surgeons absorbed new ideas in schools of anatomy, as they practiced their craft by dissecting cadavers. Since the nineteenth century, anesthesia—first in the form of nitrous oxide, then ether and, later, the safer chloroform—has made operations more feasible. Hand washing and the sterilization of instruments in chlorinated-lime solution dramatically reduced the sepsis rate of procedures.

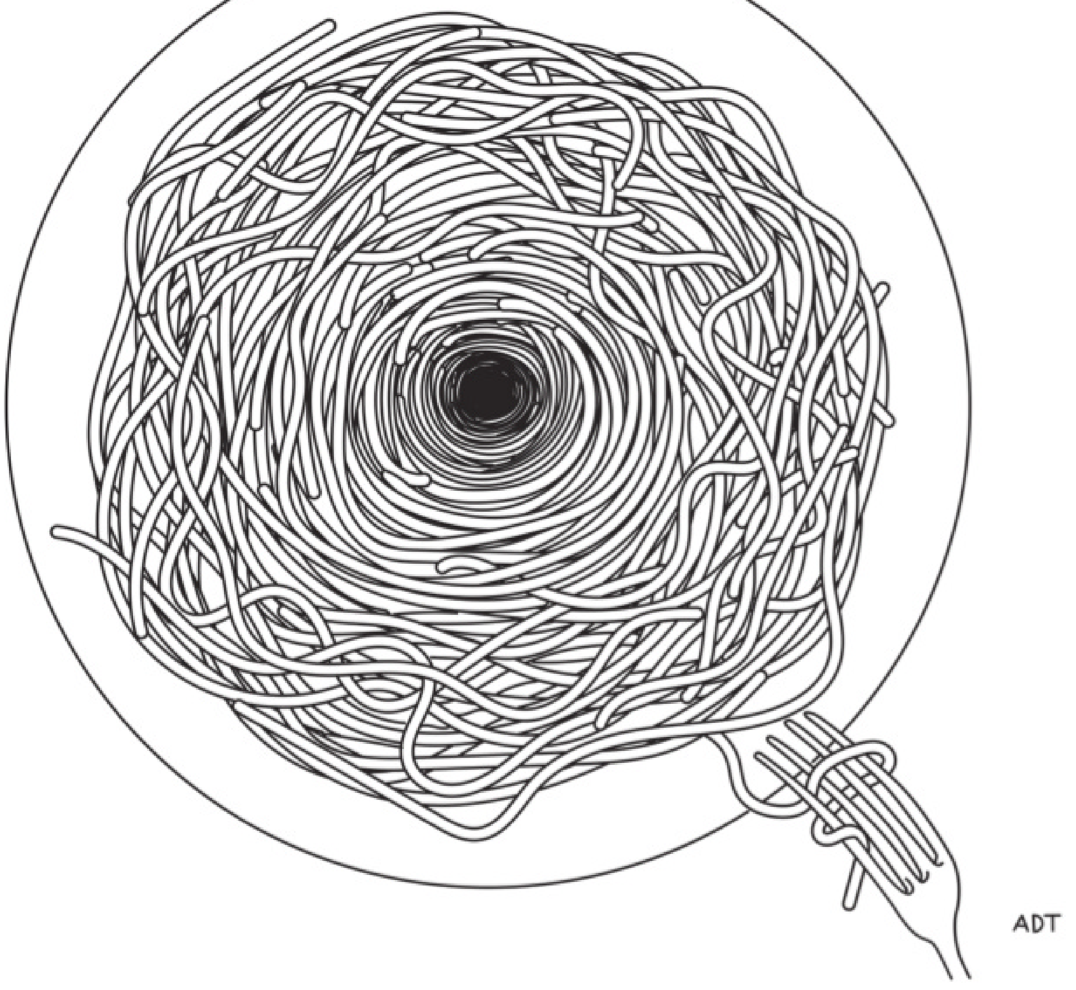
The orthopedic surgeon David Schneider writes in "The Invention of Surgery" (Pegasus) that, as a result, by the late eighteen-hundreds "surgeons did the unthinkable. Instead of just operating on people in extremis, at the point of death, surgeons began the practice of elective surgery." Progress boosted "the stature of surgeons from the lowliest to the recognized." Once dismissed as little more than butchers, surgeons became so trusted that patients with conditions that were merely "inconvenient, annoying, or even just aesthetically unpleasing" felt secure enough to go under the knife.

In the twentieth century, the discovery of antibiotics further reduced the risk of fatal infections after surgery, and a host of other innovations have brought the discipline to the point where "brain surgery" is a byword for something sophisticated and difficult. Ultrasound, CT scans, and MRI scans make it possible for surgeons to see what they will cut before the patient is even on the table. Laparoscopes permit keyhole surgery for hernias, gallstones, and prostate cancer. Endoscopes, long used in diagnostic procedures such as colonoscopies, can now be fitted with lasers that cut the tissue being surveyed—combining visualization and treatment in a single "optical knife."

As a surgeon, Schneider is known for his success in the replacement of entire

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID PLUNKERT

Don't stare too deep into the pasta.



joints, especially shoulders, and, in the later chapters of the book, he shifts his gaze to what he calls "the implant revolution," looking toward a time when surgery will mostly involve not the extraction of diseased tissue but the placing of an artificial body part or other device within the patient. He celebrates the innovators of such procedures, including one in his own field, Charles Neer, who co-authored a 1953 paper on shoulder fractures which floated the idea of using a prosthetic joint, a treatment he went on to pioneer. Schneider writes that Neer's publication gave "a sneak preview of the future, not just for surgery of the shoulder, but for every joint. The ability to implant foreign materials in the body would awaken the imagination of engineers, biologists, and surgeons, and would usher in one of the most significant upheavals in human history."

In this country today, joint replacement is commonplace, increasingly just another rite of passage in aging. Schneider catalogues the numbers. In 2014, surgeons replaced 522,800 hips, 723,100 knees, 90,000 shoulders, 15,000 elbows, 16,000 finger joints, 12,000 toe joints, 2,000 ankles, and 2,000 wrists—a total of nearly 1.4 million procedures. By 2030, he estimates, there will be some four million a year. Along with metal and plastic implants, there are electronic implants, such as cardiac pacemakers; biological implants, such as a transplanted heart or liver; and organic ones, in which a patient receives a graft of sterilized non-living tissue, such as bone or a hamstring, from a deceased donor.

Implants such as pacemakers and cardiac stents are clearly lifesaving, and joint replacements, by keeping us mobile, also extend and improve our lives. But the benefits of many other devices are more questionable. Some have proved to be life-threatening, yet implants continue to be marketed with scant oversight. Writing that "America is embarrassingly behind the times in tracking implants," Schneider cites Jeanne Lenzer's "The Danger Within Us" (2017), a carefully documented exposé of the U.S. government's abject failure to regulate devices. Lenzer, an investigative journalist who trained as a physician associate, shows how the medical-device industry has manipulated the societal need for clinical innovation in order to prematurely market products of unproven safety and benefit.

By the end of the nineteen-sixties, pressure was mounting for medical devices to be regulated, in the way that the Food and Drug Administration had long done for pharmaceuticals. In 1970, a committee of government officials, led by the director of the National Heart and Lung Institute, recommended continuing to treat devices differently. Six years later, the Medical Device Amendments to the long-standing Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act put devices under the supervision of the F.D.A. but with a different system from the one that applied to pharmaceuticals. This system, which remains the principal means of regulating implants today, divided medical devices into three classes. Class I includes "low-risk" items, such as scalpels and bandages; Class II, "medium-risk" devices, such as most artificial hips and knees; and Class III, "high-risk" devices, such as pacemakers.

In practice, there are few requirements that products in any of these categories have to meet prior to wide distribution. As Lenzer explains, most Class I and some Class II devices are "exempt from clearance or approval and can simply be registered with the FDA"; more invasive or complex devices in these classes also face minimal hurdles, requiring only that a manufacturer give the F.D.A. ninety days' advance notice before marketing a device. Unlike drugs, these items do not need to be tested in clinical trials, and they are said to be "cleared" rather than "approved."

The regulatory framework for Class III devices is not much more stringent. Although these tools are meant to undergo a pre-market approval process, in which the manufacturer must provide "reasonable assurance" of their safety and efficacy, the law has a major loophole: if a device was sold before 1976, an updated version can be released without new clinical trials, so long as the manufacturer deems it to be "substantially equivalent" to the existing device. Thirty years after the 1976 legislation was passed, the F.D.A. had approved more than a thousand high-risk devices, only sixteen per cent of which had gone through rigorous clinical testing before sale. According to a study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, the F.D.A. didn't require any clinical testing for some four hundred moderate-to-high-risk implants that it approved for market between 2008 and 2012. These included stents, replacement hips, surgical mesh, and filters for the inferior vena cava, a large vein that carries blood to the heart.

Even devices that have already been shown to be safe and effective may harbor risks. Lenzer raises the issue of Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connectivity in many pacemakers, deep-brain stimulators, cardiac defibrillators, gastric stimulators, insulin pumps, and cochlear implants. The technology enables doctors to monitor the devices from afar, but it could also open the door to hackers. Yet, as Lenzer emphasizes, "the FDA has never required device makers to encrypt the data transmitted by the devices."

In 2015, the F.D.A. received around sixteen thousand reports of deaths associated with medical devices. What's more, a study by the Government Accountability Office estimated that ninety-nine per cent of such "adverse events" are not reported in the first place, and noted that the "more serious the event, the less likely it was to be reported"—which, Lenzer points out, means that the true number of those deaths could be as high as 1.6 million. Even if the underreporting of cases turned out to be a tenth or a hundredth of what the G.A.O. believes possible, the resulting tally, of between sixteen thousand and a hundred and sixty thousand deaths, would, she writes, make medical devices "one of the leading causes of death in the U.S."

Both Schneider and Lenzer draw on a disturbing catalogue of cases to highlight the dangers associated with such devices. Between 2003 and 2010, more than ninety thousand patients worldwide, a third of them Americans, were given the DePuy Articular Surface Replacement (A.S.R.) hip implant. Years ago, a colleague at Harvard asked me whether he should get the implant. I told him it wasn't my field and advised him to ask experts. When his orthopedic surgeon could not offer sufficient data on the implant's safety, my colleague decided against proceeding. His choice proved prescient. In 2010, the device was recalled, after it was found that, in some patients, metal particles released by the A.S.R. triggered intense inflammation around the implanted hip, sometimes resulting in destruction of the surrounding tendons, ligaments, muscles, and bone.

Schneider writes, "Patients who trusted their surgeons to take away their arthritic hip pain were sometimes damned to experience even worse pain than they started with." These botched procedures necessitated "even more complex hip surgery," entailing the removal of the flawed implant and the insertion of a new one "that (hopefully) can find firm foundation in the remaining bone."

The A.S.R. hip is hardly an isolated example. In 2008, after I experienced a severe bout of lower-back pain, a doctor recommended implanting a spinal-cord stimulator to block the painful impulses. I read the clinical literature and concluded that the procedure was fraught with serious risks—including infection and damage to my spinal nerves—and that there was scant evidence of benefit. Sure enough, in 2015 the manufacturer, Medtronic, paid a $2.8-million fine to the Justice Department for selling the device without F.D.A. approval; a year later, the company admitted that, over the course of five years, it had failed to report more than a thousand adverse events related to the implant.

The list of implants that carry well-documented dangers goes on. In 2004, there was a recall, affecting ninety-six thousand people, of two types of cardiac stent, for design flaws that could lead to perforations, heart attacks, and

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death. In 2012, studies of stent implantation in more than seven thousand patients found no benefit in preventing heart attacks or death in patients who had the devices placed electively, rather than in emergency circumstances, such as during a heart attack. In 2007, the F.D.A. recalled the Sprint Fidelis defibrillator, affecting more than a quarter of a million patients, almost two-thirds of whom were in the U.S. Recently, some breast implants have been associated with an aggressive form of lymphoma. In 2013, thirty-three thousand inferior-vena-cava filters were recalled, after it emerged that, rather than stopping blood clots from reaching the heart, they actually caused them to form.

The root of the problem, of course, is money. In medicine, progress is driven by innovation, and, in our society, innovation is driven by profit. "Among implant manufacturers," Schneider writes, "market analysis drives research and consideration of device innovation." The implantable-device industry is even more lucrative, for many companies, than the pharmaceutical industry is. At the largest companies, operating-profit margins are typically twenty-five per cent or higher. In 2014, the industry's over-all estimated revenues totalled more than a hundred and thirty-six billion dollars.

The financial incentives within this industry are one of the reasons that its lack of regulation is troubling. The design teams at implant companies include not only the companies' engineers and market experts but also surgeons, who are recruited as consultants. Most of them, Schneider writes, are ethical, but the prospective payoff for a successful product is "so huge that one's ethical standards can be severely tested." There is also the risk that a surgeon's enthusiasm for a given creation will blind him or her to its flaws, bold confidence sliding into perilous hubris.

Schneider writes, "It is more likely for Toyota to know about faulty exhaust pipes in a Prius than DePuy to understand how a new hip implant is performing in the United States." A registry of implants would enable the F.D.A., doctors, and patients to access data on their risks and benefits over time, but the U.S. has no such registry, unlike Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and several countries in Europe. Schneider emphasizes how these systems provide "valuable information about the longevity of an implant when used in real-world conditions by all surgeons." A registry prevents surgeons from "cherry-picking" to exclude cases that would sully papers about implants they may have designed, and protects against the gaming of data.

Repeated efforts to implement a registry system in the United States have failed. The implant industry has a powerful lobby in Washington, and the courts and recent legislation have made regulatory oversight more feeble. Since lawsuits in state courts, where personal-injury claims are filed, effectively threaten to establish requirements that differ from those imposed by the F.D.A., medical-device companies argue that such suits should be prëempted. In 2008, at the Supreme Court, Justice Antonin Scalia, writing for an eight-to-one majority, set legal limits on implant liability in Riegel v. Medtronic. The Court affirmed that states cannot impose requirements that are different from, or additional to, those established by the F.D.A. The decision not only kept many patients from obtaining redress but, Lenzer notes, also kept potential patients ignorant of safety issues, given that lawsuits often bring such problems to light. The Court seemed to assume that the approval process is bulletproof and provides sufficient protection to the public. "If that were the case, the FDA would not have to recall about eleven hundred devices annually," Lenzer dryly writes.

The 21st Century Cures Act, which was signed into law by President Obama in December, 2016, exacerbated potential dangers. Intended to assist drug and device companies in getting their products on the market quickly, the act severely curtails F.D.A. oversight of the medical-device industry, by lowering the level of scientific evidence required for F.D.A. approval, and by allowing companies to submit such evidence as individual case reports, observational studies, and retrospective subgroup analyses. None of these methods are rigorous. The Cures Act also includes a provision that allows manufacturers to gain approval of devices without F.D.A. input, by hiring a third party to assess whether their "quality system" is "adequate." Once this certification has been awarded, a manufacturer may proclaim that its device is both safe and effective.

Given the Trump Administration and Congress's aversion to regulation, a national registry is the most realistic next step. Optimally, the F.D.A. would also insist that devices undergo at least two randomized clinical trials with appropriate control groups, as well as with sham-device groups whenever possible, to account for the placebo effect. Judicial changes—which may be even harder to achieve, given the 2008 ruling—would also enforce stronger precautionary measures, enshrining much needed patient protections. Lenzer argues that we need legislation to restore the right of patients to sue if they are harmed by devices, and calls for Congress to pass the Sunshine in Litigation Act; this bill, sponsored by Jerrold Nadler, would insure that information uncovered during product-liability suits can't be kept secret under nondisclosure agreements, which prevent attorneys from notifying the F.D.A. of the harm their clients have suffered.

Schneider writes that, "even under the best of circumstances, patients are, in effect, part of a large, uncontrolled experiment, and when the regulatory framework in a society is flimsy, sluggish, or nonexistent, is it any wonder that patients can be harmed by the thousands?" He argues that our "technological society" is essentially a laboratory, and that, as consumers, we participate in experiments every day. That may be fine for the latest smartphone, but our body's health and safety are another matter. Human experimentation with implants cannot depend on a "social laboratory." When we submit to being cut, and to having something implanted in our body, we have a right to feel some level of confidence that it has been shown to be safe and beneficial, meaning that it has a chance to cure. ♦

BOOKS

LIVING MEMORY

Annie Ernaux excavates her past.

BY MADELEINE SCHWARTZ

“A Girl’s Story” is a reconstruction of events and a deconstruction of feelings.

A young woman has her first sexual experience. She is pleased to be desired by someone. She does not feel humiliated. But, later, she is mocked, tormented by others who believe that she has debased herself. Those whom she thought of as her friends now treat her like nothing. She feels shame. Is the shame hers? Or is it a reflection of what is expected of her?

“To go all the way to the end of ’58 means agreeing to the demolition of all the interpretations I’ve assembled over the years,” Annie Ernaux writes in “A Girl’s Story” (Seven Stories), published in French in 2016, and now in English, translated by Alison L. Strayer. The book is an account of a sexual encounter Ernaux had as a teenager, and it is both a reconstruction of events and a deconstruction of feelings. The emotional history, she hopes, will be the most personal one, the truest one. The challenge of being a historian, however, is knowing whether what she felt—and what she still feels—really comes from within.

The book circles around the summer of 1958, when eighteen-year-old Annie is working as a camp counselor in northern France, in a town she calls “S.” She is sheltered and naïve; aside from a trip to Lourdes with her father, she has barely left home. At camp, she develops a crush on a man she calls H. He looks like Marlon Brando: “She does not care that the other female counselors murmur to each other that he’s all brawn, no brains.” She thinks of him as “the Archangel.”

What draws her to H is a need to be seen. No one has ever looked at her with such a “heavy gaze.” They dance at a counsellors’ party. “Seduction” is not the right word for what happens next. But Ernaux doesn’t give these events a single name. Instead, she describes, as clearly as she can, how she follows H to her room, how “she feels his sex prod at her belly through her jeans. . . . There is no difference between what she does and what happens to her.” Soon, “a thick jet of sperm explodes in her face, gushing all the way into her nostrils.” The precision of this language doesn’t necessarily evoke pleasure, but Annie is consumed by emotion, desperate for H and the possibility of his desire.

Ernaux is an unusual memoirist: she distrusts her memory. She writes in the first person, and then abruptly switches and speaks about herself from a distance, calling past selves “the girl of ’58” or “the girl of S.” At times, it seems as though she were looking at herself in an old photograph or a scene in a movie. She tells us when she is getting lost in the story, and where her memory goes blank. Ernaux does not so much reveal the past—she does not pretend to have any authoritative access to it—as unpack it. “What is the point of writing,” she says, “if not to unearth things?”

In this attempt at unearthing, her prose combines the spare and the unsparing. She seems desperate to put it all on the page: period blood, abortions, contraceptive pills, dirty underwear, erections, and semen. But Ernaux’s writing is rubbed down, simple, almost clinical in its exactness. From the vantage of adulthood, she Googles and questions, she revisits old haunts and reads old letters, as if she were a detective cracking an unsolvable case: the mystery of her own past. But none of this investigating is done, one senses, with the expectation of ever truly settling on a truth. “I am not trying to remember,” she writes. “I am trying to

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

be inside. . . . To be *there* at that very instant, without spilling over into the before or after. To be in the pure immanence of a moment."

Of course, our recollections aren't continuous, and you can't always get "inside," no matter how many angles you try. The difficulty of interiority is perhaps one reason that Ernaux, both as a girl and as an adult, can't help but turn to those around her for cues. As readers, we lose access to "the girl of S," often at the moments when we need it most. Instead, Ernaux begins to discuss the reactions of the other counsellors:

> I will have to present another list that includes the coarse taunts, the hooting and jeering, the insults passed off as jokes, whereby the male counselors made her an object of scorn and derision, they whose verbal hegemony went unquestioned and was even admired by the female counselors.

Reading this book in 2020, one is tempted to think of these gaps and tricks of memory in terms of trauma—the kind of trauma that keeps women from giving, or getting, a full account of their own lives. Completion, we're told, is a necessary condition for truth. "Don't tell us the story of your life, it's full of holes," the other counsellors like to say. Her peers dig up her letters and read them out loud to one another. They drag her to H's door. The teenage Ernaux does not realize what is happening. It is only later that she perceives the effects of this "verbal hegemony." When someone writes "Long live whores" on her mirror in toothpaste, these words begin to shape how she sees herself.

And it isn't so easy to look away from the mirrors that society creates for us. When Ernaux leaves the camp, she develops bulimia, and her period stops. "I could not imagine there was a name for my behavior. . . . I thought of it as a moral failing. I don't believe I linked it to H."

These links are what Ernaux, as a writer, has always been after. In the sixty years and twenty books since the summer of 1958, she has been devoted to a single task: the excavation of her own life. "I would go so far as to judge my previous books as vague approximations" of reality, Ernaux writes in "A Girl's Story." In one, she describes a love affair; in another, the relationship between her parents. Throughout, the contours of her story stay the same—a childhood in Normandy as the daughter of two grocers, the shame of her lower-class upbringing, the clash of these origins with her later literary successes. Her mother "knew all the household tips that lessened the strain of poverty. This knowledge . . . stops at my generation. I am only the archivist," she writes in her 1988 book, "A Woman's Story."

Ernaux's books are small, simple, rarely exceeding a hundred pages. In each, she is always asking how she can be sure that her memories are correct. In "A Woman's Story," she talks about her mother's death. Nearly a decade later, in "I Remain in Darkness" (1997), she goes back to that moment and declares her recollection incomplete—she hadn't fully described her mother's long cognitive decline, the terrors of dementia. A consistent voice guides each of these revisitations: a scientific and searching "I." The books are whittled down to an intense core—not a confession but a kind of personal epistemology. In France, they have brought Ernaux fame, prizes, and a number of stylistic descendants.

Central to her work is an awareness that the most intimate moments of life are always governed by the circumstances in which they occur—that probing the personal will also involve investigating the historical. This is clearest in "Happening" (2000), an account of an abortion Ernaux had in 1963. Early in the book, she describes going to see an acquaintance who is known as an activist for greater access to birth control. He tries to sleep with her. Then he tells her that he can't help her. After she has travelled to Paris to obtain the abortion, she hears that "a woman who lived round the corner would do it for three hundred francs. . . . Now that I no longer needed them, suddenly, bevies of abortionists were springing up left, right, and center." By the time Ernaux published the book, abortion had been legalized. But a victory in legislation does not make disclosure any easier. "When a new law abolishing discrimination is passed, former victims tend to remain silent on the grounds that 'now it's all over,'" she writes. "So what went on is surrounded by the same veil of secrecy as before."

In typical Ernaux fashion, she reads over her old diary to compare what she still remembers with what she experienced at the time:

> To convey my predicament, I never resorted to descriptive terms or expressions such as "I'm expecting," "pregnant" or "pregnancy." They endorsed a future event that would never materialize. There was no point naming something that I was planning to get rid of. In my diary I would write, "it" or "that thing," only once "pregnant."

Writing from a very different future, she is struck by her own "euphemisms and understatements." The pages of a diary are, ostensibly, the safest, most honest record of a self—and yet even here Ernaux sees her internal narrative being shaped by external pressures, such as laws. Her most private experiences, she sees, were not really her own at all.

There's a fair bit of feminism in this idea. Ernaux often refers to Simone de Beauvoir, whose "Second Sex" sought to show how a woman's choices, decisions, and even thoughts were molded by economic and social conditions. These conditions create a kind of corridor through which one's life passes. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," de Beauvoir wrote. One way to read Ernaux's book is as an attempt to understand that opaque, painful, essential process of "becoming." (Ernaux sent her first book to de Beauvoir, and also her second. De Beauvoir wrote to say that she preferred the first.) Where de Beauvoir describes the process in theory, Ernaux renders it in visceral detail: the food that she eats, the food she purges, the sight of blood in her underwear.

She does this most successfully in her 2008 book, "The Years," a kind of hybrid memoir of postwar France. It moves chronologically from the Second World War until the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the scope and the point of view of the story are always changing. Here is a description of the end of the war, and here is an account of a teen-age girl's first experiences masturbating. Here is the rise of the Internet, where "we could research the symptoms of throat cancer, recipes for moussaka, the age of Catherine Deneuve, the weather in Osaka . . . buy anything from white mice and revolvers to Viagra and dildos." And here, just a few pages later, is an intimate story of watching one's children have children of their own.

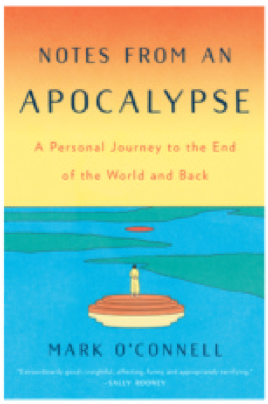
This pastiche of images and insights can seem like a haphazard swirl, but it is, Ernaux's books suggest, the only authentic way to twine the personal and the historical. In "A Girl's Story," Ernaux finds herself toggling between the understandings she has reached in her seventies and the confusions she endured as a teen-ager. Just ten years after she left camp, the country was overtaken by the sexual revolution. Sexuality became something to celebrate, not something to hide. This both does and doesn't matter:

> Ten years is a very short time in the greater scheme of History, but immense when life is just beginning. It represents thousands of days and hours over which the meaning of things that one has experienced remains unchanged, shameful.

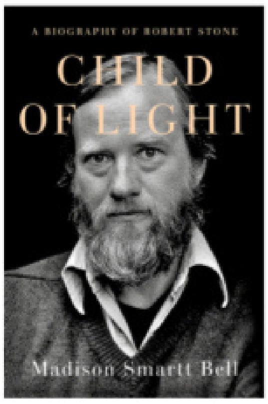
It is almost impossible to consolidate knowledge and memory into one. "Must I, as of now, move back and forth between one historical vision and another, between 1958 and 2014? I dream of a sentence that would contain them both, seamlessly, by way of a new syntax," she writes. But a story that is fully continuous, a story without gaps, escapes her.

At the end of the book, Ernaux describes visiting the camp a few years after working there. It should be a moment of closure. But she looks around and sees only gray walls and empty gardens. The location does not speak to her. It seems, she writes, "less familiar than I had thought." Instead, it is she who feels the urge to speak. Returning to the camp, she writes, is a "kind of propitiatory gesture" that allows her to see her memories as inspiration rather than as a source of shame. It is after this visit that she begins to write—that she begins, step by step, to move toward an elusive whole. ♦

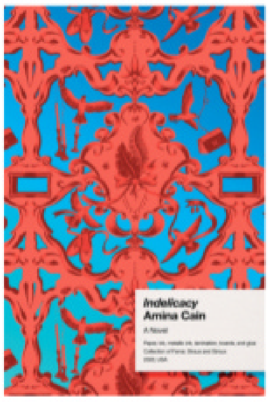
BRIEFLY NOTED



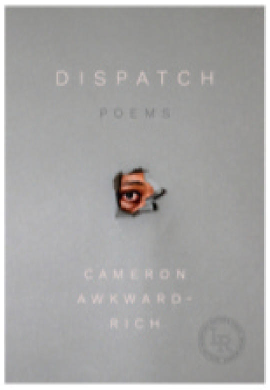
Notes from an Apocalypse, *by Mark O'Connell (Random House).* A fitting travelogue for our stationary moment, this book seeks out the men (and a handful of women) who share the author's fixation with doomsday scenarios. Meeting bunker builders, would-be Mars colonists, and preppers constantly at the ready to "bug out" of society and into the woods if crisis strikes, O'Connell diagnoses in them a craven obsession "with purifying their lives of dependence on others." But other people affirm connection—a volunteer firefighter in Australia, Maori dancers honoring mosque-shooting victims in New Zealand—and O'Connell's "future-dread" haltingly yields to faith in humanity's resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity for coöperation.



Child of Light, *by Madison Smartt Bell (Doubleday).* "I had taken America as my subject, and all my quarrels with America went into it," the late Robert Stone wrote, in his first novel. This comprehensive biography shows how such ambition drove a career that made Stone, as one critic put it, "the apostle of strung out." Bell, a friend of Stone's, chronicles his subject's turbulent adolescence, his stint in the Navy, his health problems, and his issues with drugs. He treads carefully around some topics, such as Stone's open marriage, but the personal aspect mostly enriches the book. It is Stone's widow, however, who emerges as perhaps the hero of the story: "I thought, this guy could really use some organizing," she recalls. "And then I thought—me, I can do that."



Indelicacy, *by Amina Cain (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* This sparse, elliptical novel finds new complexities in the familiar conflict between creative independence and the lures of traditional domesticity. A woman in an unnamed city works as a cleaner in a museum while nurturing a private passion for writing. She meets and marries a rich man who whisks her away from her humble life and her only friend, but her fundamental urges remain. Her disquiet, and her husband's failure to take her writing seriously, prompts a search for the true meaning of freedom. Stripped of all inessential details, the narrative has the simplicity of a parable—one whose images lodge themselves uneasily in the mind.



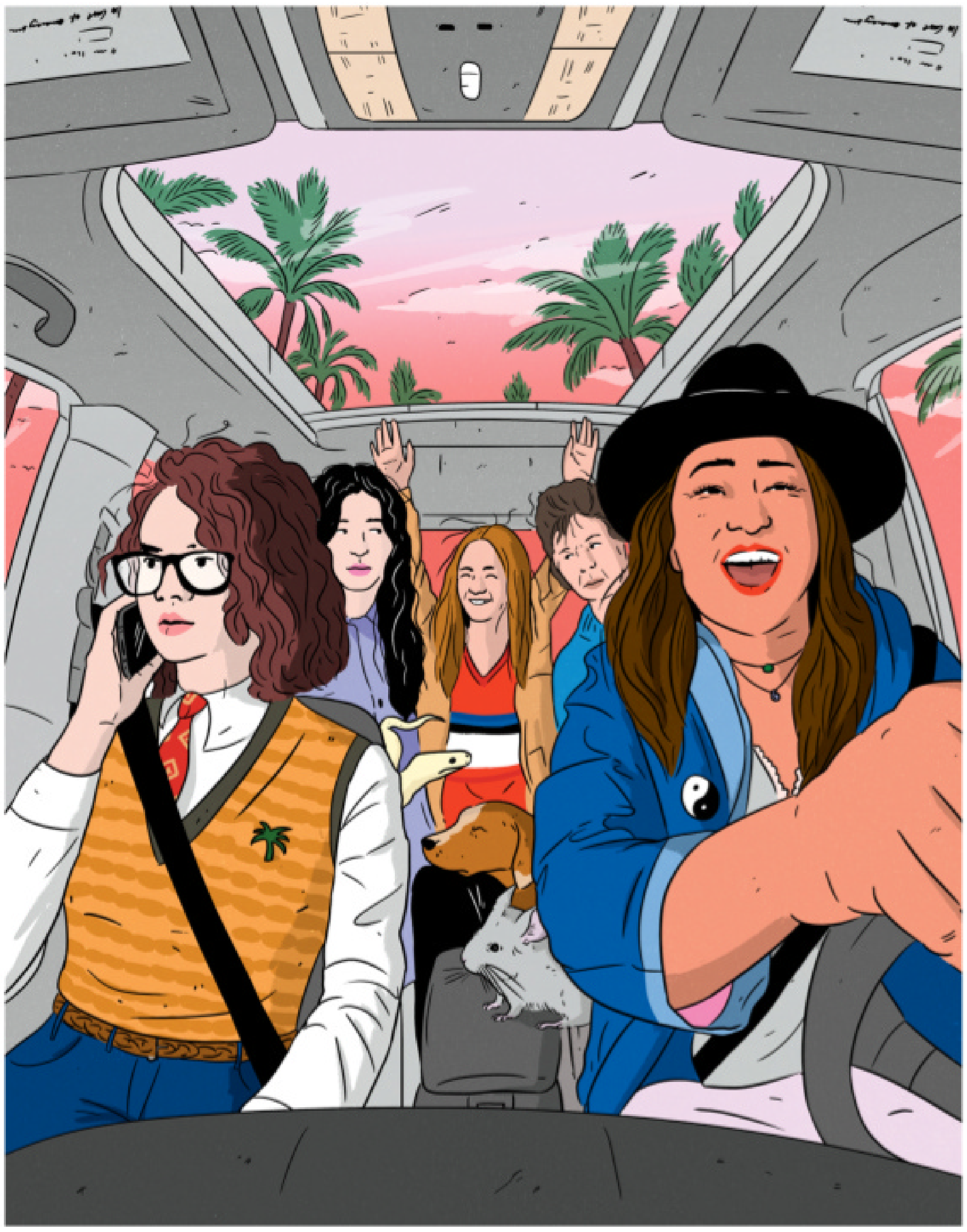
Dispatch, *by Cameron Awkward-Rich (Persea).* An anchoring thread running through this finely honed poetry collection is a series of poems titled "[Black Feeling]," the first of which reflects on the wounds inflicted by police brutality, racism, and contemporary media. The speaker's tinnitus provides an extended metaphor: a chronic condition whose intermittent dormancy does not signify its disappearance, and whose din, unperceived by the unaffected, offers the sufferer painful evidence that he is "alone in the manic dark, head/in my hands ringing//& ringing, faithful/goddamned blood alarm." In such moments, Awkward-Rich's terse yet beguiling lyric articulates what it is to inhabit a particular body at a particular time in history, and, in the shadow of violence, to seek—or resist—openness.

ON TELEVISION

MOTHER LOVER

The functionally dysfunctional matriarchy of "Better Things."

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



Pamela Adlon's character is a woman's woman, not a man's fantasy of one.

The joy and relief with which the general television-watching public seemed to greet each new season of "Game of Thrones"—*at last, dear, merciful Lord*—is how I feel about the reappearance of "Better Things," Pamela Adlon's bittersweet, very funny self-portrait of a show on FX, now in its fourth season. Adlon plays Sam Fox, an actress in her fifties who's been in show biz since childhood and is successful but not famous. When she's recognized, it's in the gynecologist's waiting room, or on a trip to a friend's wedding in New Orleans, where a flush-faced drunk in an L.S.U. cap lurches over to her table at Arnaud's to confess that he's masturbated to her—"more than once." She lives in L.A. with her three daughters, who range in age from around twelve to nineteen, and in temperament from prepubescent sweetness to savage adolescent entitlement. Across the street lives her mother, Phil (played by the magnificent Celia Imrie), a kooky, self-involved Brit, who stays busy inventing new ways to be a pain in the ass. And that's just about the whole megillah: the banality, comedy, frustration, and weirdness of daily life in this functionally dysfunctional matriarchy. I can't get enough.

Those of us who love the show, which began airing in 2016, should count ourselves lucky that it has endured. Adlon created it with Louis C.K., her longtime friend and collaborator, who wrote many of the early episodes. Two seasons later, the #MeToo movement arrived, C.K. fell from grace, and Adlon cut personal and professional ties with him. Could the show survive? Actually, it has thrived, growing looser and at the same time more tonally sure of itself. I do wonder whether Adlon is tempted to address the C.K. situation head on; the selfish, destructive behavior of even beloved men is squarely in the "Better Things" wheelhouse. So far, she hasn't, though Season 3 featured a catharsis of a different sort, in which Sam confronts the vapid director of a big-budget alien-apocalypse movie that she's starring in, for neglecting the safety and the morale of his cast and crew while paying ample attention to his nubile production assistant. ("The Gamay is a very durable grape," he drones; never has workplace flirtation looked so dull.) As Sam tears into him, everyone else on set stays silent, watching her self-immolate on their behalf. "An apology would be a thing . . . that would be nice," she mutters, admitting defeat. Instead, she's offered the use of the director's porta-potty, a metaphor disguised as a concession.

This season opens with a declaration of atmosphere. It's raining in Los Angeles, all day, every day, as if the city had been put under a spell. At the end of Season 3, we left Sam suspended in a moment of high drama: Frankie (Hannah Alligood), her smart, sulky middle child, stuck between still adorable Duke (Olivia Edward) and beautiful, spoiled Max (Mikey Madison), had run away from home. (What the household lacks in testosterone it makes up for in boyish names.) Now, however, after a trip with Duke to their deadbeat dad's, Frankie's back, hugging Sam like a little kid. What happened? The show doesn't say; some things in life are allowed to remain a mystery. Naturally, Frankie's affection flips to repulsion as soon as Sam returns it. One of the show's barbed jokes is the degree to which Sam both resents and accepts her kids' taking her for granted; she knows that they need her as a stable post to sharpen their claws on, though she does have a breaking point. "You're a cunt, Max," Sam snaps, after Max pushes her one step too far. "You're a big fucking cunt, your sister's

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA BREILING

an asshole, and your other sister's *great*." The tension melts, and mother and daughter collapse laughing. It's funny because it's true.

"Better Things" shines in part because of its casting; the three young actresses have made themselves at home in Adlon's world, enriching it with the instinctive, intimate gestures of real life. But its success depends on Adlon, whose personality is the medium through which everything else is filtered. On "Louie," the FX show, created by Louis C.K., that launched a thousand quirky, navel-gazing imitators, she played Pamela, an aggressively distilled version of herself: a hilarious hard-ass with a voice like a 3 A.M. cigarette and a low tolerance for the idiotic antics of weak men, which was exactly what made her irresistible to them. Her Sam Fox alter ego, at once wiser and more vulnerable, relentlessly capable and still somehow unable to keep herself from royally screwing up, is a far fuller creation. She's a woman's woman, not a man's fantasy of one.

Along with Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Sharon Horgan, and others, Adlon is part of a growing cohort of female TV-makers who are interested in showing us what it's like to live in a body: to be turned on or to gain weight, to have hot flashes or to need—while trapped in traffic in a friend's car—suddenly, urgently, to pee. (Luckily, the friend has young children; Sam straps on a diaper and lets loose.) We get a terrific slapstick bit in which Sam tackles her recalcitrant mother to the ground to capture her saliva for a DNA test, and a sweet view of Duke and a friend disfiguring their faces with Instagram-style makeup. Duke, skinny as a toothpick, complains that she looks fat. She's learning to play the game of female self-deprecation, but her friend immediately recoils: "If you're fat, then what the fuck am I?" Duke is horrified; while it's true that the other girl is plump, we can tell that Duke has never before thought of her that way. "You're *perfect*," she says, with genuine awe. The friend takes another look at herself in the mirror, her nose striped with contouring makeup, and proudly declares, "I know." That kind of wry sincerity is a distinguishing feature of "Better Things." In a long, cozy sequence in the season's first episode, Sam cooks breakfast for her sleeping household, sizzling sausage and frying eggs in a private ritual that's best appreciated before her daughters rise and unloose chaos. The scene doesn't advance plot or develop character. But, as they say of home cooking, it's made with love.

At least one consolation awaits us on the other side of the pandemic: Larry David will have hay to make from the concept of social distancing. He's already begun to say his piece—in a widely circulated P.S.A. sponsored by the State of California, David, relaxing at home in an easy chair, scolds "the idiots out there" who insist on going out when they should be staying in. "Go home. Watch TV. That's my advice to you," he says, and you should take him up on it, starting with the latest season of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," its tenth. The show has been on the air intermittently since 2000: that's a mind-boggling twenty years of Larry, Cheryl, Susie, Jeff, and the rest of the crew. (Leon Black, Larry's indispensable sidekick, played by J. B. Smoove, came on several years later. Sadly, the great Bob Einstein, who played Larry's friend Marty Funkhouser, died last year; the show insists that the Funk Man is on a trip to China.) The sheer fact of "Curb"'s longevity gives it an aspect of performance art. There's something fascinating and disarmingly human about seeing the actors' faces age in real time. They all look markedly older this go-round—though, thankfully, they're as emotionally stunted as they ever were.

Fan as I am of Larry David, I've occasionally wondered whether he should call it a day. Season 9, with a silly plot about fatwas that seemed at least a decade out of date, fell wide of the mark. But Season 10 is a return to top form. Larry, looking at Trump's America from inside his liberal Los Angeles bubble, does what he does best and makes everything about him. There's a gag in which he discovers that wearing a MAGA hat gets him out of obligations with people he wants to avoid, which is to say, everyone. More riskily, he dips a toe into the waters of #MeToo, in a plot that involves Larry's assistant, Alice (Megan Ferguson), mistaking his usual socially unacceptable boundary-crossing behavior for a sexual advance. (In a gift from the comedic gods, Jeff Garlin, who plays Larry's best friend and manager, happens to look uncannily like Harvey Weinstein.) My favorite episode might be one that has no particular comment to make about our cursed political present, but loses itself in the pleasures of competitive tipping and the sound of the Spanish lisp. It's petty, ridiculous, and pretty, pretty, pretty good—in other words, just right. ♦

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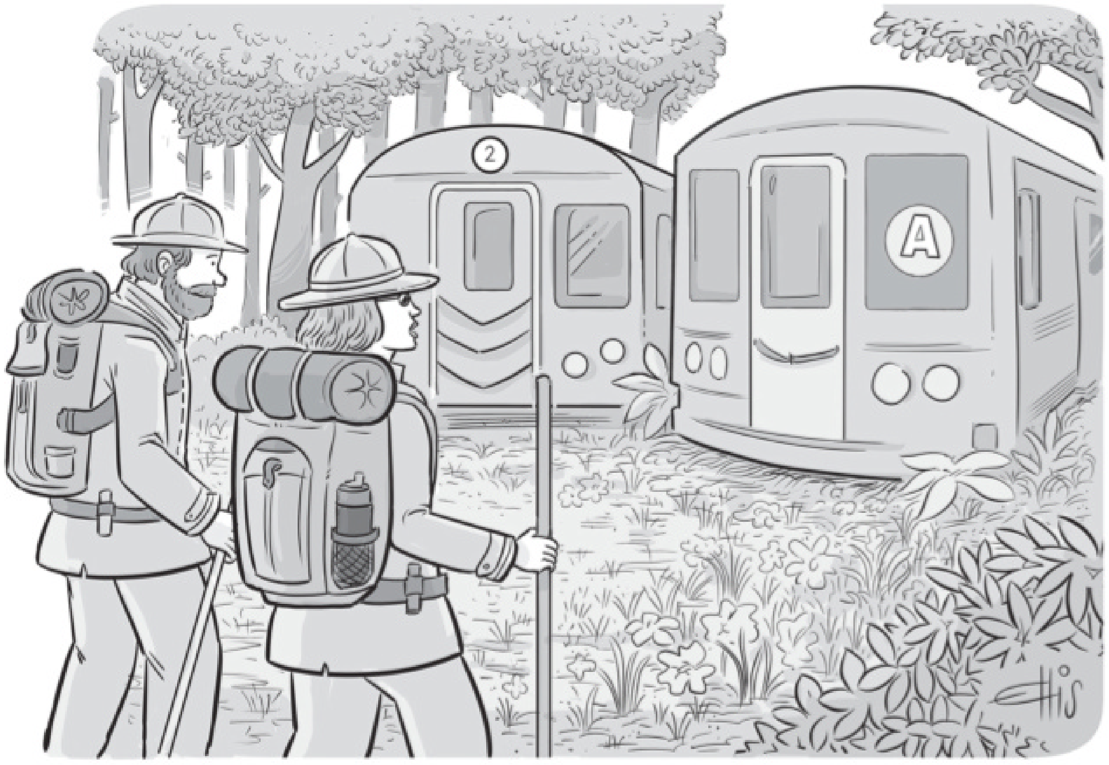
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Ellis Rosen, must be received by Sunday, April 19th. The finalists in the April 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 4th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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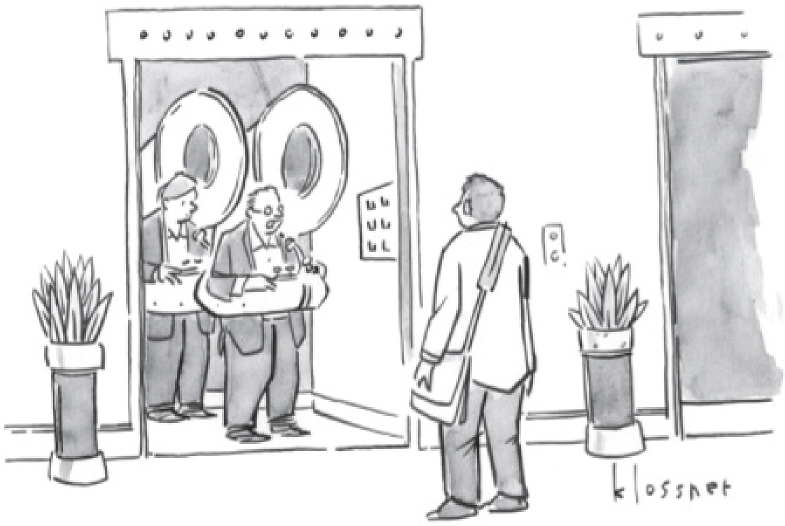
THE FINALISTS

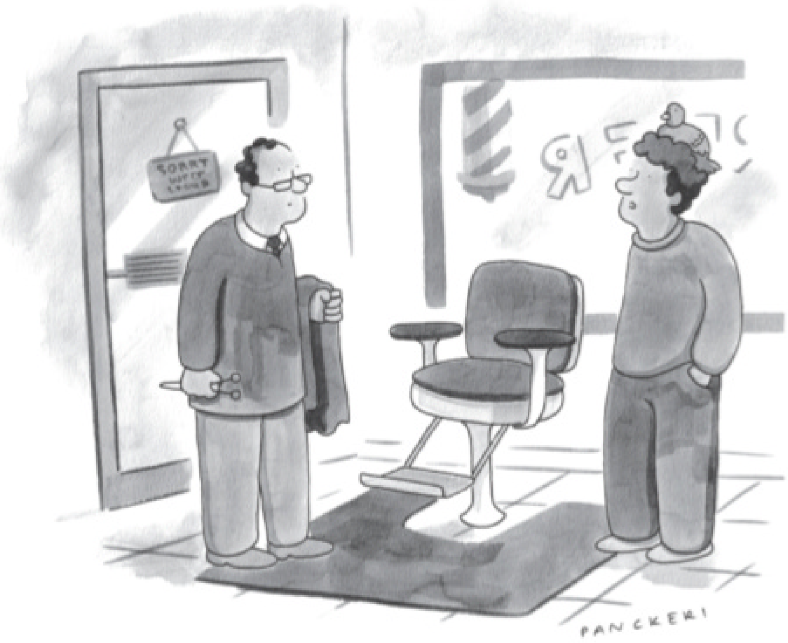


“We promise there will be no awkward silence.”
Todd Houlette, New York City

“No, you come in on four.”
Colin Mills, Boston, Mass.

“Don't worry. We know how to conduct ourselves.”
Thom Thacker, Irvington, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Could you trim the sides but leave it feathered on top?”
Ben Long, New York City

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Don,
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